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MOJIKAKIYA

Illustrator

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1

The background of the cover is a vibrant, painterly illustration. It depicts a man and a woman standing in a lush, green landscape with a blue sky and distant mountains. The man, on the right, has spiky red hair and a beard, wearing a long, tan-colored coat with a fur collar and a black mask covering his lower face. He is holding a large, dark sword. The woman, on the left, has long, dark hair and is wearing a white dress with a red corset and a black cape. She is holding a small, glowing blue orb. The overall style is that of a high-quality anime-style illustration.

My **Daughter** Left the
Nest and Returned an
S-Rank Adventurer

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Nest and Returned an
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Seventeen Years Ago

There were times when his missing right leg would ache—phantom pain, as they called it. It was the same burning pain as when that black fiend tore it off with its teeth. It had already been eight years since then, and in that time, he had grown weary of its ceaseless torment.

It was on one of those days that Belgrieve leaped up before daybreak from the burning sensation in a leg long gone. He held the remaining stump of his thigh for several agonizing minutes, which felt like hours to him, coated in a greasy, cold sweat until the pain finally subsided.

“Dammit...” He sighed, then got out of bed. He couldn’t possibly go back to sleep now.

Outside the window, a faint sliver of white loomed over the horizon. However, the stars were still out in all their glory, and the meager bit of light on high only made the whole world darker by comparison.

He carefully equipped the crude prosthetic he had left beside the bed, tapping it against the floor a few times to make sure it was properly affixed. By now he could walk without any difficulty. In fact, after the long period of rehabilitation he had gone through, he could even fight with a sword. Unfortunately, it wasn’t exactly reliable enough for him to return to his livelihood.

There were those in the world who called themselves adventurers. The weakest of the bunch would gather herbs and other raw materials, while those with a bit of skill under their belts would earn a living hunting beasts called fiends. It was a trade where one’s ability to put food on the table any given night depended on whatever tasks the guild was offering that day, but slaying a powerful foe could net an adventurer incredible wealth and fame.

In truth, it was far from steady work. Many jeered at them; it was seen as a trade for ruffians and failures who couldn’t hold a proper job. Even so, society could not function without them, and there was still an unending line of people

who became adventurers anyways.

“Their lives are an adventure in and of itself,” someone once said, quite sarcastically. Yet that statement did contain a hint of truth. It was a life lived perpetually between pleasure and death. That was what it meant to be an adventurer.

It had been seven years since Belgrieve returned to his hometown—a rural village called Turnera. He was twenty-five now. Having lost his parents early, he had left for the capital city of Orphen at fifteen in the hopes of hitting it big and becoming the talk of Turnera. However, he had hardly been there two years before a fiend made off with everything below his right knee.

He tried taking up small jobs for a while—gathering herbs and the like—as he rehabilitated but ultimately returned home as the reality of the situation dawned on him. He had lived in the small village ever since, doing various jobs that mainly involved tending to the fields.

As he walked out of the house, the brisk, fresh air filled his lungs and the gentle breeze ruffled his short red hair. All around, he could hear chickens clucking. The early-bird farmers were already preparing for work, and the shepherds had unlatched their fences to herd their flocks to the green pastures outside the village where they could eat their fill. Goats and sheep bleated, boisterously walking as one living mass with sheepdogs energetically racing around them along the way.

Gradually, the world was illuminated by the rays of morning light over the distant mountain range.

He hadn’t walked far when he came across Kerry, a farmer, who was on the way to his fields. They were the same age, and had often played together when they were kids.

“Hey, Bell.” Kerry grinned. “Morning and all that.”

It bothered him a bit how feminine his nickname was, but Belgrieve had already given up on that front.

“Morning, Kerry. Looks like someone’s working hard.”

“You betcha. I was just about to plant some onions. How about lending a

hand, eh?”

“Gladly—is what I’d like to say, but can it wait until tomorrow? Old Caiya has me booked to gather herbs today.”

“No problem, just thought I’d ask. But hey, you’re pretty busy yourself, aren’t you?”

“It’s nothing, really. Give me a call if there’s anything left to do tomorrow.”

“Ha ha ha, I might just take you up on that. Well’n, see ya.”

“Later,” Belgrieve said, and Kerry made off for the fields.

While Belgrieve had been a laughingstock when he first returned, he was now seen as a reliable member of the community. He would be the first to volunteer for the jobs no one wanted and would use his adventurer knowledge to pluck herbs and drive off fiends. He helped with the fields, too, and whenever he hunted, he would share his spoils with the village. At this point, the villagers saw him in a completely new light.

Using his morning walk to patrol the village, Belgrieve made sure there were no signs of fiends around. Then he returned to his house, practiced some with his sword, ate breakfast, packed lunch, and headed off to the mountains.

“It’s fall, all right...”

Once the sun had made its ascent, the sky was so vast and blue. The trees were in the midst of changing to reds and yellows, and it was as if the summer heat from just a month ago had been a dream. But this was no time to grow careless. If he let his guard down, it would be winter before he knew it.

He scanned the undergrowth and the vines coiling around the trees for their berries. One by one, the plants he was looking for filled his basket.

“Almea grass, rattan fruit, harvest-moon grass... Are the grapes in season yet?”

Belgrieve plucked one of the small wild grapes and plopped it into his mouth; it was sweet and sour. “Just right. The kids will love it.”

He hadn’t been asked to gather them but piled mountain grapes and akebia fruit over the herbs anyway.

Exploring the mountain was always dangerous work. Fiend encounters were a risk, of course, but even wild animals were a considerable threat to most humans. Lumberjacks did their work in the forests around the village but hesitated to venture into the mountain ranges beyond.

A former adventurer like Belgrieve could handle most fiends and beasts that inhabited these parts. He hadn't missed a day of training since he returned. The loss of his right leg put him at a far cry from peak condition, but nothing that lived in these mountains could ever get the drop on him.

After having gathered his fill of herbs before the sun was at its peak, Belgrieve found a nice sunny spot to sit for lunch. It was a simple morsel of hard-baked bread and goat cheese, but the fruits he'd gathered elevated it to quite a delicacy.

He devoured the bread, washed it down with water from his flask, and took a deep breath. The autumn air was refreshing and invigorating; just a slight bit of rest was enough for him to fully recharge.

"All right, it looks like I can help Kerry today." He'd found everything he was looking for earlier than expected and could be back in the village by evening.

It was around the time Belgrieve had stood and stretched that he heard a faint cry. He immediately reached for his sword, his eyes narrowing as he scanned the area. He could not sense any fiends. However, the cry was audible so long as he concentrated. It was the whimper of a baby.

"This deep in the mountains?" he warily muttered to himself.

There were fiends called pixies who mimicked babies' voices. While not strong, per se, they were an ill-natured sort who would use trickery and magic to mess with a weary traveler's sense of direction.

Belgrieve had been to these mountains so many times he considered them his own backyard and had never encountered any pixies there before—but nothing was lost in being cautious. Keeping his hand on his hilt, he slowly made for the direction of the voice.

After parting the thicket, what he found left him almost at a loss for words. "Well I'll be..."

It was no pixie; it was none other than a human baby, lying in a basket woven from wisteria vines. It was wailing, perhaps from an empty stomach. As a matter of fact, with the amount of sound it was making, it was a miracle a wild beast hadn't gotten to it first. At this time of year, the mountains housed wild dogs, wolves, and bears gorging themselves for winter.

Belgrieve approached and observed the baby carefully. Its hair was black, rather rare in these parts. When he picked it up, it stopped crying and stared back at him with its wide, black-colored eyes. He could almost see his own reflection in those bleary pupils.

He scowled. Who could have left it here? It was always big news in Turnera whenever a child was born or was going to be born. The baby's ears were not pointed, so it wasn't an elf. So who was the parent who came all the way out here to abandon their baby? No amount of rumination could lead him to an answer.

"What now...?"

He hesitated for a moment. However, seeing the baby become so calm and relieved as he cradled it in his arms, he felt as though he couldn't just leave it be—especially not with the trust reflected in its eyes.

Belgrieve gently stroked the baby's head. It started to doze off, feeling entirely at peace.

The bottom of the basket was layered several times over with old rags and dried herbs that were said to keep evil at bay. It seemed the child wasn't abandoned out of hatred or neglect.

"Fine." He sighed. "Don't really got a choice, do I?"

When Belgrieve descended that mountain, he was laden with a new basket and a baby.

Five Years Ago

“Hyaaaah!”

The girl with short black hair raised her wooden sword overhead and swung it down on Belgrieve. Her footwork was impressive; she practically glided along the floor as she aimed for a gap in his defenses.

However, Belgrieve nimbly pivoted on his peg leg, avoiding her wooden blade and striking with his own at the girl’s head. The girl yelped and fell to her knees.

“You’re falling for obvious feints,” Belgrieve said, tapping his wood sword against his shoulder. “Forget the conspicuous openings. Try to predict what your opponent is going to do instead.”

“Urgh... You seriously hit me...” She looked up at Belgrieve with teary eyes.

“Huh?” He winced. “Well, I mean, you told me to take it seriously...”

She held out her arms, a sullen look on her face. “Carry me.”

“Jeez... You’ll always be a baby, Ange.”

As Belgrieve lifted her up, the girl gleefully hugged him back.

Twelve years had passed since he had picked up the baby in the mountains. She had grown into Angeline, a lovely young lady with black hair. Perhaps because she had been raised by a former adventurer, she ultimately came to admire adventurers herself. By the time Belgrieve realized it, she was there beside him, imitating the practice swings he did every day. Her form improved rapidly, and she certainly had the talent.

In that case, Belgrieve thought, *why not?* And so, he taught her the sword for self-defense. By this point, even the village adults were no match for her. Though of course, she had never managed to land a strike on her father and master.

Angeline nuzzled her head against Belgrieve’s chest.

“You smell nice, dad...”

“The things my kid says these days... How about we have dinner?”

“Yeah.”

Belgrieve entered the house, still carrying Angeline. It was almost dusk.

He was on the cusp of thirty-seven. The youthfulness had completely vanished from his face, his jaw was covered in a red beard, and stateliness befitting his age had begun to set in. Despite being nearly forty, however, he was still in good shape. He still entered the mountains and fought off beasts and fiends. His prosthetic leg was hardly a problem anymore, his movements stronger and even more refined than in his youth. His simple and honest work earned him more and more trust, and he was now one of the pillars supporting the community.

Dinner consisted of a vegetable-and-salt soup with some small bits of meat, hard bread, and goat cheese, with an abundant platter of Angeline’s favorite cowberries for dessert. After harvesting cowberries in the fall, they would usually nibble on them sparingly. However, this was the last dinner they would be eating together. What harm would a little indulgence do?

The mountain wildlife had been growing livelier as of late, and Belgrieve would often take Angeline along to hunt. Though they would partake in a portion of the meat, a majority was shared with the villagers. Possibly because of that, the villagers were better nourished than before, and despite the meager livestock they kept, they looked quite healthy as they worked their fields.

On top of getting meat, hunting served as Angeline’s special training. If she was ever going to become an adventurer, she would need experience fighting non-human opponents in the hills and valleys.

Belgrieve watched Angeline merrily munching down on her bread across the table. Whenever she wasn’t swinging a sword, he could see nothing more than a normal twelve-year-old girl.

He was disapproving when he first heard she wanted to become an adventurer. However, he had once been an adventurer himself and he understood her desire to take her chances out in the world and put her skills to the test, rather than wasting them in the middle of nowhere. He wasn’t

senseless enough to crush her young dreams—that would be tantamount to denying his past self.

Even so, to be perfectly honest, he found his daughter adorable and didn't want her to face any danger. He wanted to keep her close enough to dote on.

After doing his share of thinking, he ultimately reached his answer. He would help her properly make it as an adventurer however he could. There was no keeping an adventurer out of danger, so his best bet was to give her as many useful skills as possible and ensure she was never treading on thin ice. Additionally, he took care that she didn't get conceited with her own strength, ignoring the struggles of the weak.

However, while he managed to impart his skills, Angeline was still a spoiled child. Belgrieve was somewhat worried over whether or not she could make it as an adventurer like that, though he did not mind being depended on. When she badgered him to carry her, he would always end up doing it, his stern facade giving way to warm smiles.

His spirit as her teacher always conflicted with his parental love, but the love generally won out. Belgrieve was human, and a father, after all.

“Thank you for the meal.”

“Yeah...”

He piled up the tableware, brought it to the sink, and was about to pour a pot of water over it when Angeline tugged on his sleeve.

“Dad...”

“Yes?”

“I'll do it...”

“No, it's no trouble at all. Daddy can do it...”

Angeline shook her head. “I'll be going to the capital tomorrow... I won't be able to help out anymore.”

After a pause, he relented. “Ha ha, I see. Then have at it.”

Belgrieve ruffled her hair, and she could feel her eyes narrowing in delight.

Then she took his place and began washing dishes.

She grew up to be a good girl, Belgrieve thought. He didn't know a thing about raising children; he'd never even had a wife. When he first picked her up, he was anxious over whether he could properly raise a child. But looking at her now, he reassured himself that he wasn't mistaken.

Angeline would set off for the capital tomorrow. She had prepared for it bit by bit until there was nothing left to do. Neither of them intended for this to be a lifelong parting, but it would be a parting nonetheless. There would be no getting around the loneliness. However, if they lingered on it too long, it would only make them sadder. Both Belgrieve and Angeline acted as if it was just any other day. The cowberries were the only special thing about it.

"Time flies..." Belgrieve muttered as he watched her clean dishes.

She was already twelve. Her hair was cut short like a boy's, but her features were girly and cute. *She would have surely made for a good wife for someone if she didn't become an adventurer*, Belgrieve thought, then shook his head.

"I don't know when to give up, do I," he said, smiling bitterly.

Once the dishes were done, Angeline pounced on him.

"Whoa."

"Dad... Hug me..."

"Your hands are still wet... Good grief."

She melted into his embrace.

"I'll do my best," she said, after a moment.

"Yeah."

"Even if I'm on my own...I'll do my best to become a splendid adventurer who can protect the weak."

"Yeah."

"Then I'll land a hit on you one day."

"Ha ha, I'll be looking forward to it."

He stroked her head as she sat on his lap.

“What do you do when you get lost in the woods?”

“Look for silverwurm grass. The largest petal points north.”

“How do you find water?”

“Follow the scent of devil’s dropwort. It only grows near clean water.”

“What do you need to be most careful about when fighting fiends?”

“You have to make sure there aren’t any other fiends around. Then make sure you’re standing on advantageous terrain.”

“What do you do if you fight someone you can’t beat?”

“Run as soon as you can. If you can’t, keep running in mind. Secure an escape route, then catch the opponent off guard and run.”

“Good.” Belgrieve nodded, satisfied. “Surviving is an adventurer’s top priority. Never go beyond your limits.”

Angeline returned the gesture, rubbing her cheek against his beard. “I know... I got it.”



“Nice and prickly...”

“The things my kid gets up to... You have an early day tomorrow. How about we call it a night?”

“Dad...”

He stood, and she tugged on his sleeve.

“Can we sleep together today...?”

“Hmm? Weren’t you training to sleep alone?”

“Meanie,” she said after a beat.

Seeing her stick out her lips and pout, Belgrieve cackled.

“Just kidding. Come on.”

“Hooray...!” Angeline gleefully clung to his arm.

Chapter 1: The Weather Was Great, despite the Early Summer Sun

The weather was great, despite the early summer sun. It was strong, but not yet blinding. The vegetables in the fields took this sunlight in and grew rapidly. Chickens raced around, while the shepherds led their dogs to the nearby fields where they had left their sheep and goats to roam. After squatting down to pluck some weeds from the furrow, Belgrieve, with sweat glistening on his brow, stood and stretched out.

“Ah... So hot.” Summer had yet to enter full swing, but it felt much hotter when he moved his body. The sunlight did not help.

Before long, Kerry’s son Barnes rushed over in a panic.

“Wh-What are you doing, Mr. Bell?!”

“Hmm? Barnes? Well, as you can see, I’m weeding...”

“No, you’re not! Our farmhands can do that!”

“I had time to spare...”

“Our folks are going to run out of work at this rate.”

“Yeah, well, that’s true, but...”

“C’mon. My old man told me to get you. Over here, come on.”

Belgrieve had a wry smile on his face as Barnes herded him under the shade of the gazebo. Kerry was working there, looking through his ledger. He was quite a bit rounder than he had been in the past, a full-bodied man in high-quality clothing. By now, he was a manager rather than a farmer, and he would rarely work in the fields himself.

Kerry was known as the wealthiest man in the village. His fields were sprawling; his sheep numbered a hundred and fifty, his goats one hundred; and he had opened workshops to produce textiles and cheese, providing work for

the rest of the village. It was in Kerry's field that Belgrieve had been plucking weeds. He hadn't been hired to do so, but he would often help with other fields when he wasn't busy with his own, and Kerry's was one of them.

Kerry grinned when he spotted him. "Yo, Bell. Let me guess, you were weeding our fields again."

"Pretty much. I saw it needed tending, so I..."

"Ha ha ha, don't worry about it! But, you know, Bell, you don't got to work the fields anymore, you get me? We'd all gladly chip in to feed one more mouth. Between your work in the mountains, and with the fiends—hell, you teach the kids too. We're all grateful."

Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his head. "I didn't really do it for that."

"Aha ha ha, that's what I like about you! Oi, Barnes! Fetch the wine, would you? Cheese too!"

His son rushed off.

"Hey now, you're drinking in the middle of the day?"

"I'm not slacking off. I tried a new process on the cheese. That peddler who dropped by town told me about it."

"Hmm... Then what about the wine?" Belgrieve asked, looking at the earthenware jug Barnes brought in. It didn't have a label.

Kerry laughed. "Truth is, I've been raising a grapevine for some years now. Thought it might be the birth of a new industry here."

"Wait... You mean on that new plot!"

"Now you're getting it!" Kerry chuckled as he poured the glass. The crimson liquid leaped and bounced around the glass.

Six years prior, Kerry had devised a plan to cultivate a patch of wasteland near the village. The soil quality was terrible and a lizard fiend had appeared in the middle of the process, so many thought the plan had reached an impasse. However, the fiend was dealt with by Belgrieve and Angeline. The wasteland was steadily cleared and cultivated until it had become a splendid field, though Belgrieve never knew it would be for grapes.

The wine was a bit too tart, but the flavor was deep and enjoyable. “Not bad at all.”

“You think so? Then do you think it’ll sell?”

Belgrieve took another mouthful and swished it around his mouth. “It’s a bit too sour. But just a little work, and it’ll sell fine.”

Kerry looked quite happy to hear that. “That’s a relief. The grapes are still small, and I’ve not got a lot of them, but I think I’ll plant a few more seedlings this year. Could you help me then?”

“Of course I will... The cheese is pretty good too.”

“Isn’t it? Have as much as you want.”

For a while, the two forty-year-old men munched on cheese and sipped wine across from one another. Then, Kerry spoke up as if it suddenly occurred to him: “How’s Ange doing?”

“Can’t say. Haven’t heard much this past year.”

“Hey now, you okay with that? Sounds pretty iffy.”

“No news is good news, as they say.”

“I see... You trust her a lot then.”

“Ha ha. I mean, last year she mentioned that she’d become S-Rank. Haven’t got another letter since. I’m sure she’s busy as all heck.”

“Is S-Rank something amazing?”

“Yeah, that’s the highest in the guild.”

“That abandoned kid, eh... She’s really something.”

“Yeah... I’m proud to be her father.”

It had been five years since Angeline left for the capital city of Orphen. Belgrieve was about to turn forty-two. While Kerry had grown fat, his own body had firmed up instead, and his muscular build did not give off the slightest sign of age getting to him. However, the wrinkles in his face were deeper; his hair had grown out, and he now bundled it in the back. His red beard and mustache grew thicker each year.

Barnes shuffled towards them in a hurry. “The caravan’s here, pops! Also, there’s a letter for Mr. Bell! It’s from Ange!”

“Oh! That’s wonderful! Good timing, eh, Bell?”

“Ha ha, almost like they planned it.”

Belgrieve took the letter with a wry smile and broke the seal. Kerry and Barnes anxiously watched him read it to himself.

“I see... I see.”

“Wh-What did she say? How is she? She doing well?”

Belgrieve lifted his face with a grin. “She’s been given an extended break, so she’ll be returning at the end of the month.”

“Oh...!” Kerry shot to his feet. “Big news! Great news! I gotta prepare something.”

“Hey, hey, don’t make such a big deal out of it.”

“What are you saying, Bell? It’s the first time in five years. You should be a bit happier.”

“Ha ha, it just doesn’t feel real to me.”

But still, he tried picturing it. If five years had passed, Angeline would now be seventeen. She was surely taller by now. What about her short hair? Had her face grown a little more adult-like? Did she have a boyfriend now? He had always enjoyed watching how all of the village’s children grew, but even more so his own daughter. Then it was, indeed, cause for celebration.

Once the joy had hit him, Belgrieve filled his glass again and held it high.

“Cheers. To Ange.”

“Praise be to the spirits, and the Great Goddess Vienna!”

Maybe it wasn’t so bad to drink midday after all. At least, that was what Belgrieve was starting to think.

○

In the city of Orphen, at the counter of an adventurers’ guild at a downtown

street corner, a black-haired girl was laying her anger bare. The lady running the desk was pale, quivering. The building was filled to the brim with adventurers, yet every one of them seemed on edge, silent with stifled breath.

The black-haired girl was also an adventurer, wearing light armor for mobility and bearing a sword at her side. Her hair, which was long enough to fall to her hips, had been artlessly tied back, and her eyes—somewhat droopy and sleep-deprived—were the same shade of black. Those black eyes were seething, as she made no attempts to conceal her rage; her glare pierced right through the receptionist.

“I remember you saying I could take a break tomorrow,” the girl growled after a moment.

“N-No, um.” The receptionist seemed to be scared out of her mind. “Th-That was the plan, but there have been numerous reports of a Calamity-Class fiend around the town of Garuda...and Angeline, you’re the only one who can handle it...”

The black-haired girl was Angeline. It had been five years since she left Turnera. Now seventeen, she was taller and had begun to look rather grown-up, though some childlike innocence still lingered on her face.

Ange continued to rage, “Why do I have to go? It’s just a Calamity-Class; any A-Rank and above should manage. You’d go so far as to revoke my precious holiday just to rope an S-Rank in?! This is tyranny...!”

“Th-Th-The thing is, an AA-Rank party headed out a while ago, but they failed...”

Angeline slammed her fist against the counter. Cracks spread across its marble surface, reaching as far as the floor. The receptionist had nearly fainted by then, but she just barely held on.

“Such incompetence... Each and every one of them... They’re all dragging me down because of their failures...!” Emanating a pitch-black aura, Angeline muttered what sounded like curses under her breath. “S-Rank? So what? It’s been one hard request after the next... I don’t even have time to write to dad, never mind returning home! Now my long-awaited time off is crushed by a sudden request...! I’ve been doing this nonstop for almost a year now! Why do

Calamity-Class fiends keep popping up...?! And why are they left unchecked...?! What the hell are the rest of them doing?!"

Angeline looked over the other adventurers, who were silently trying to make themselves look scarce. They awkwardly turned their backs to her and averted their eyes.

She violently scoffed, then smacked the counter again. The cracks spread even further.

"This is pathetic!"

"H-Hold on, Ange. Calm down."

"Sh-She's right. There's no use in taking it out on her."

Two girls who had been anxiously watching the exchange finally stepped in to stop her.



Angeline heaved a deep sigh, looked at the receptionist, then barked, “The details! Out with it!”

“Y-Yes ma’aaam!” she whimpered, frantically ferrying the paper listing information on the request over to Angeline.

“Hmph,” Angeline scoffed, then turned on her heels. “Merry, Anne. I’ll be at the usual bar.” Then she left the building. Silence descended in her wake before the building erupted into noise, as though they had been holding their collective breath until she left. The receptionist held her chest and heaved a deep sigh.

“Th-That was terrifying... I’ve never seen her that angry before.”

“Sorry. She’s not usually like that. Right, Anne?” said a girl who gave off an air-headed impression. Her light-purple curly hair grew out wildly, only contained by her pointed hat, and she wore a robe with blue as the base color. Her name was Miriam, and she was an AAA-Rank magician. She was a year older than Angeline, but as she was shorter, she looked like the youngest of the group.

“Yeah... I’ve never seen Ange like that either.” The girl with short, chestnut hair nodded. She wore sturdy clothes that offered a full range of movement and carried a bow in her hand. She was Anessa, similarly AAA-Rank, and specializing in the bow. Anessa was the oldest, at nineteen. She was levelheaded more often than not, which meant it was up to her to stop Angeline and Miriam when they ran amok. They were both Angeline’s party members.

After consoling the receptionist, the two of them made for the establishment where Angeline awaited them. They found her there at the bar, just as disgruntled, chowing down on roast duck. Thanks to the unfathomable ill humor she exuded, there were no customers to be found around her in spite of how busy it was. The girls smiled bitterly, then took their seats.

“You’re late.” Angeline pouted.

“Sorry, sorry.”

“Hey, was the break really that important to you?”

Parties containing S-Rank adventurers were dragged all over the place to take

on high-ranking fiends, harvest rare materials, and clear high-level dungeons. Adventurers were generally thought to be freer—practically self-employed, even—and they took jobs and vacations on their own schedule. However, this was not the case for S-Ranks. There were fiends that only the higher ranks could deal with.

Fiends came with their own ranking system; any fiend above A-Rank was considered Calamity-Class, which meant B-Rank adventurers and below would not stand a chance. An A-Rank adventurer or higher would have to deal with it.

The higher she rose in the ranks, the more it came to pass that the guild would unilaterally shove work onto her rather than her choosing it for herself. It was essentially like she worked for the guild now.

At A-Rank, the concept of vacation still existed, though she hadn't found the time for an extended leave. Lately, however, the frequency of Calamity-Class fiend encounters had risen sharply.

They were never that numerous before, and the system which bound high-ranking adventurers to their duties had been little more than a formality. It was easy to take a break. Not to mention that a city on Orphen's scale boasted numerous S-Rank adventurers—the loss of one should not have posed much of a problem. Now, however, the number of fiends had increased, and there was no room for any leeway.

Angeline had been making a big deal about her vacation for quite a while now, and in the time since had hunted many formidable fiends and cleared many a difficult dungeon. This just had to happen after she had completely cleared her schedule; the girls couldn't blame her for being in a bad mood. However, *this* was on another level. They hadn't known her for long, but neither could remember ever seeing her like this.

Angeline irritably stuffed her cheeks with duck, violently washing it down with a swig of wine. Then she took a deep breath and fell to the table, defeated.

"I thought I'd finally be able to see dad..."

"Your father...?"

"You bring him up now and then. What sort of person is your dad, Ange?"

“He’s kind, strong, and cool. The best dad I could ask for,” she said, her eyes wistfully trailing off into the distance—though some might have interpreted her expression as one of ecstasy instead.

Miriam and Anessa smiled wryly and reached for the drinks that were brought to them. After a sip, Miriam asked, “Does that mean he’s an adventurer?”

“That’s right... My dad taught me the sword along with what it meant to be an adventurer. But I’ve never managed to land a hit on him before.”

“Huh...”

“R-Really?”

The girls were frozen in place. When Angeline first appeared at the guild five years prior, a group had picked a fight with her, partly just to tease a little girl. She beat them down on her own.

That alone wouldn’t have been anything special, but those adventurers were a B-Rank party. B-Rank was just a stone’s throw away from the upper echelon of adventurers. They were solidly mid-tier, their skills leagues beyond the average street thug or brawler.

However, those B-Rank adventurers found themselves no match for a twelve-year-old girl who hadn’t even registered yet. This astounded the adventurers of Orphen, and the girl became the subject of much attention.

In less than a year, the girl was B-Rank. In another four years, she was S-Rank. Her moniker—the Black-Haired Valkyrie—was known throughout the dukedom, nay, the entire empire. The point being, Angeline’s skills had been abnormal when she was only twelve, but her father must have been even more so if Angeline had never managed to strike him.

“Your dad sounds pretty incredible...” Miriam mused.

Angeline’s eyes lit up, and she gleefully bobbed her head. “Yes, incredible. But he’s not just strong, he’s amazingly kind too...”

“In that case, is he someone famous?” Anessa asked.

To this, Angeline puffed out her chest as if she had been waiting her whole life for that question. “That’s right. The man whose face can silence crying

children—the Red Ogre Belgrieve. That’s my father.”

“...O-Oh, I see.”

“Uh huh...”

Who? both Miriam and Anessa thought. But Angeline sounded so proud, they hesitated to say they didn’t know of him. They both concluded that he had to be someone famous, and they had just never heard of him. After all, there were skilled fighters famous in other countries who were unknown in the dukedom.

However, and this went without saying, Angeline was telling a complete fabrication—though in truth, she herself was incredibly serious about it and didn’t see it as such. Monikers sprang up when adventurers performed great feats and were earned from those around them. Having retired at E-Rank, Belgrieve never had a moniker. However, as she saw her father’s red hair and the spirit with which he swung his sword, Angeline arbitrarily came to the conclusion that he would have to be called the Red Ogre no matter what.

In short, her father was so strong and kind that she simply could not accept the fact that no one knew him, or that he was wasting his skills in the countryside. This was a misplaced display of filial piety. Now that bragging about her father had restored a bit of her mood, Angeline unfolded the request form.

“Garuda,” Miriam muttered as she looked at the map. “That town’s three days away by carriage.”

“Yes... And a wyvern to boot. That’s a pain. What’s the plan, Ange...?”

The second she looked at Angeline, Anessa inadvertently swallowed her breath. Angeline was glaring at the picture of the wyvern, her expression the spitting image of a demon from the deepest pits of hell.

“So you’re the one who ruined my vacation... Unforgivable. I’ll mince you and feed you to the pigs...!” Letting off the pitch-black aura again, Angeline gallantly stood once more. “Off we go... It’s just a flying lizard. We’ll blast it straight out of the sky...!”

Her two companions could do little but wordlessly nod.

A week later, the wyvern fiend that had terrorized the town of Garuda was instantly beheaded by a black-haired adventurer who appeared like a bolt from the blue.

Chapter 2: It Was Yet Another Day for Belgrieve

It was yet another day for Belgrieve—another day that found him loitering around the entrance to the village. He tapped his right peg leg against the ground.

“She can’t be long now...” he muttered to himself.

According to the letter that had arrived the previous week, Angeline should have been back by now, yet he hadn’t heard another word from her. She said she would return at the end of the month, and it was already the very last day. Only hours remained before it would be a new month entirely.

None of it had felt real to Belgrieve—at least, when the letter first came—but as the month’s end drew closer, he grew more and more restless. He found himself losing much time as he thought over what to say to her, what food to treat her to, and how they would spend their days together.

Through the good services of Kerry, he had arranged for a grand celebration for that anticipated day, but Angeline never showed up. Unbeknownst to him, that was around the time she set off for Garuda to hunt down a wyvern. While Belgrieve’s disappointment was beyond words, the villagers were quite content to relish in the extravagant meal that would have gone to waste.

From that day on, Belgrieve could be found waiting around the entrance to the village whenever he wasn’t working. He was quite a sad sight to see, so much so that the villagers didn’t have the heart to reach out to him.

“Is she doing all right?” he murmured to himself. “Did she come down with something...? Surely she’s not dead—no way, no how...” As his imagination took a turn for the worse, he found himself hunkering down and covering his face. “Oh... Ange...”

In the midst of his sorrows, Belgrieve heard the clattering of a leisurely carriage. His face shot up, and he immediately caught the peddler’s gaze. He narrowed his eyes to see if Angeline was along for the ride but did not spot

anyone who looked the part.

“I guess not,” he said after a beat.

Belgrieve’s shoulders slumped, and for a moment, it felt like the phantom pain in his right leg was welling up again.

Once the peddler had reached the entrance, he cheerfully called out to Belgrieve. “A good day to you, sir. Am I right in assuming that this is the village of Turnera?”

“Yes... That’s right.”

“Thank the heavens. Oh, yes, if you could be so kind, could you also tell me where I might find a Mr. Belgrieve? I came bearing a letter for him.”

Belgrieve lifted his face, surprised. “Belgrieve? That would be me.”

“Oh, what good luck.” The peddler climbed down, took an envelope from his sack, and handed it over. “This must be for you then.”

It was certainly addressed to Belgrieve, and he was delighted to see the sender’s name—this was a letter from Angeline.

As the peddler made off for the village square, Belgrieve immediately broke the seal on the letter. His eyes breezed through the winding, wriggly penmanship. It was a short message.

“Hmm... I see, a sudden request...” He was overcome with relief—she was neither sick nor dead. According to the letter, she had received a sudden request to fight a wyvern in the town of Garuda and lost her chance to come home. In the near future, she intended to book another vacation and return for sure next time.

Angeline always had so many things to write about that, when push came to shove, she didn’t know what to write at all. Ultimately, her letters often turned out short and simple.

“She’s doing well. What a relief...” Now that the load had been lifted off his shoulders, Belgrieve headed home with a lightened gait. Bit by bit, the summer sun grew stronger, until walking beneath it was enough to draw sweat. There were heaps of reaped grass forming mountains by the roadside, letting off a

sweet, summery scent.

In front of his house, ten-odd children of varying ages were swinging around wooden swords. They cheered as he came near.

“Ah, it’s Uncle Bell.”

“Are we on for training today?”

“Yeah, I got a letter, and I’m all better now. Sorry for worrying you.”

Ever since Angeline had left, Belgrieve would teach swordsmanship, herbalism, and mountaineering to any child who asked. At that age, a few of them did long for lives of adventure, but most just wanted to learn simple swordplay, and how to navigate the mountains.

However, Belgrieve had been so absorbed in waiting for Ange, he had postponed their training these past few days. The children had been left to swing swords on their own.

Belgrieve got them into an orderly line, having them practice swings so he could correct any unneeded movement and guide them to move properly one step at a time. Even the boy who had just turned six was beginning to look the part of a swordsman. The children learned fast, and while they improved at varying rates, they were steadily absorbing his teachings. By the time they grew up, these boys and girls would be able to reap the blessings of the mountains, and they would not need to fear wild beasts or fiends any more than was prudent.

Belgrieve gave a satisfied nod. “You’ve gotten a lot better while I wasn’t looking.”

“Really?”

“Hey, Uncle Bell. When can we go to the mountain again?”

“Let’s see... I’ll have to talk to everyone’s parents, so it will be a while.”

Some complaints arose from the children. Their adventures in the mountains were full of wonderful and stimulating experiences.

Belgrieve offered a wry smile. “I get that you want to go, but the mountain is a dangerous place. Remember what I told you? You don’t go there for fun.”

The children fell into a somewhat peeved silence. They were all raring to play. However, there were times when fiends suddenly sprung up in the mountains, and they were far more dangerous than any of the local wildlife. It was far too dangerous to venture out without the proper resolve.

Looking over the quiet children, Belgrieve stroked his beard and laughed. “As long as you understand. I’ll try to arrange it as soon as I can.”

“Really?!”

“When?! Today?!”

“It won’t be today or tomorrow... But I’ll only take the kids who listen to me without getting distracted.”

The children were suddenly all on their best behavior.

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Angeline hummed a tune to herself as she sorted through the souvenirs she had amassed.

“Will dad like this one? Oh, that one should go to Kerry...”

After slaying the wyvern and taking care of all of the other miscellaneous jobs the guild brought to her doorstep, she finally managed to book some time off. She intended to board a stagecoach that afternoon, which would take her to Turnera in around nine days if nothing went wrong.

Now, what would she do once she was back? First, she would have her dad carry her, and give her a thorough head patting. Instead of writing, she could tell him in person how she became an S-Rank adventurer, and he would tell her she did a good job. They would eat together, sleep in the same bed, and yes, this time when they dueled, she would land a hit on him for sure.

Her expression softened as her imagination ran wild. At first, she had swiftly stuffed her clothes, provisions, and souvenirs into her bag. Then, once another idea struck her, she would take the souvenirs out again, and replace them with new ones that, perhaps, the folks back home would prefer. For a while now, she had been repeatedly carrying out this process.

Of course, now that their leader was going on holiday, Miriam and Anessa

inevitably had quite a bit of free time on their hands, and they watched this scene in amazement. How could this possibly be the same quiet and cold Angeline?

Miriam lightly shook off these ruminations. “How much does she love that father of hers?” she whispered into Anessa’s ear.

“Yeah... It’s a bit surprising...”

“Right? I didn’t know she had that side to her.”

It hadn’t even been a year since the two of them formed a party with Angeline. Angeline had flown solo up until that point, and that was one of the things that made her so fearsome. It usually took several people working together to climb through the ranks.

Miriam and Anessa had been in another party together but had split off due to a difference of opinion. Before they had decided on what to do next, the guild petitioned them to team up with their little prodigy. Apparently, the guild was of the opinion that giving Angeline a team would help her more reliably tackle the higher difficulty requests.

At first, the two of them saw Angeline as a lone wolf, while Angeline had never been a girl of many words. They had mishaps, misunderstandings, and their fair share of strained moments. However, while she didn’t speak much, it wasn’t as though Angeline was a misanthrope, nor was she a zealot. They were all around the same age, in any case; they eventually warmed up to one another and became a close-knit party. Fighting shoulder to shoulder fostered a firm trust in one another. That said, it was only recently that Angeline’s bizarre love of her father had come to light. This was a bit much for them to keep up with.

Angeline, on the other hand, seemed as if she didn’t care in the slightest. She flaunted this hidden side of herself freely and seemed unhinged.

“I’m going ho-ome. ♪ This afternoo-oon. ♪ Gonna go and see dad soo-oon. ♪”

Once she had finalized her souvenir selection, Angeline danced around the room before turning towards the other two as if she had only just remembered they were there.

“Hey, are you sure you don’t want to go with me?”

“I mean, one of the conditions for your holiday, Ange, was for us to help out other parties while you’re gone...”

“Right, right. I am a bit curious about what sort of man your father is, though.”

“Mmm... I wanted to introduce him to you. But not much we can do in that case. Good luck with work.”

The two sighed as Angeline sent them an innocent smile and a thumbs up. Apparently, this kid lost a few brain cells whenever her father was involved. That did, in a sense, make her a bit more approachable, but it came with quite a conflicted feeling.

Noon came and went. Angeline headed off for the station to find a stagecoach headed north, and Miriam and Anessa accompanied her. Tomorrow, they would be supporting another party, but they had the day off.

“It’s as crowded as ever, I see.”

“*Cough, hack...* And dusty as hell, to boot. Ange, do you see one yet?”

“Hmm... Too many people to tell.”

But as they dawdled, someone burst into the station in a panic. It was a guild receptionist. After nervously scanning the area, she caught sight of Angeline and made straight for her, parting the crowds to get there.

“Ah! There you are! Angeline, big trouble!”

“Huh...? What...?”

The receptionist was out of breath by the time she reached them. Stooping down to collect herself, she began to prattle. “There is an outbreak of Calamity-Class fiends in Asterinos! The town is under siege—the adventurers stationed there are holding the fiends at bay, but they won’t last. Please, won’t you go to their aid?”

Angeline furrowed her brow. “You’ve got to be kidding me... I’m already on holiday! In a couple of minutes, I’m taking a coach to Turnera to see my father...!” she huffed angrily.

The receptionist fell to her knees, practically praying now. “Please make an exception! Please! The other S-Ranks are all out, and we’ve already suffered casualties! I’m begging you!”

“Grrrr...”

As Angeline bit her lip, Anessa placed a hand on her shoulder. “I get where you’re coming from, Ange. But if we don’t go, the town will be wiped off the map.”

“She’s right, Ange. It’s a shame, but just this once... Okay?”

For a while, Angeline stood rigidly straight and silent, but eventually, she shoved her bag of gifts onto the receptionist.

“Hmm? Er, what’s this...?”

“Keep it safe... What are we dealing with?”

“I-It’s a colony of giga ants, and they have a queen with them, but...does this mean...?!”

“Ha... Aha-ha... You goddamn insects... I’ll slaughter every last one of you!” Angeline roared as ferociously as a wrathful deity.

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All who stood in her way were fated to be mowed down. She did not stop for even a second to linger over those feeble humans. It was all for the prosperity of the colony that she marched her troops to seek a site to build a better nest. The human town before her could not even be considered an obstacle—that was the natural order of things.

So what is this?

The giga ant queen shuddered at the monster standing before her. Such intensity, such bloodlust, such terror-inspiring *presence*—these were all emotions the queen had never felt directed at her before.

There had been humans who challenged her in the past. They were all so weak and pathetic that even trying to defy her was presumptuous. To her, they were nothing more than nutrients serving themselves up on a silver platter.

However, the human before her, burying her brethren one after the next, was different from any that had preceded it. This was no human. It was the personification of fear itself, come to kill her. The pitch-black-haired deity of death effortlessly carved through the royal guard, handpicked from the finest elites. Its black eyes took in the queen, and she could see herself shrinking back in the reflection. *Is this me? Is this truly how a queen should be?* she wondered, trembling.

She could hear bursts of magic in the distance. The reaper's companions were slaughtering her brethren outside.

One step, then another. The raven-haired death drew closer and closer.

Driven half mad with terror, the queen shook her massive body to spray the area with a powerful acid. However, it did not work on that thing. Like an intangible ghost, its masterful footwork carried it beyond every drop and every swipe of the queen's legs.

"It's you... It's all your fault! Have some damn consideration for one second before you crawl out, why don't you... A mere ant!" the avatar of death muttered.

By now, the queen had gone completely insane. She cried out as she desperately flailed her limbs, doing anything in her power to sweep away the fearsome creature standing before her.

And then, out of nowhere, she felt the sensation of something passing through her body. She had already been cut. Her vision left her. The queen died, not knowing what had happened, and never regaining her mind in the end.

"It's because you got in the way... You only have yourself to blame," the personification of death muttered, and left, having completely lost interest.

Just like that, a colony of giga ants—an adversary that would usually take several parties of A-Rank or higher working together to defeat—was tragically annihilated by one seething black-haired girl and her friends.

Chapter 3: The Group Walked in Single File

The group walked in single file down the animal trail. At the lead was a boy, around fourteen years of age, and he was followed by ten other kids of all sizes. Taking up the rear was a middle-aged man with red hair and a beard—Belgrieve.

“Don’t just focus on where you’re stepping. You have to be mindful of your surroundings too. How does it look up front, Pete?”

Pete, the leading boy, cautiously surveyed the area before looking back over his shoulder.

“Forest, as far as I can see.”

“No need to state the obvious. Take it all in. Don’t just use your eyes, use all five senses.”

Pete furrowed his brow, his eyes focused straight ahead. He felt the wind; he honed his ears.

“I can vaguely hear running water,” he said after a pause. “There’s also this...refreshing sort of scent.”

Belgrieve nodded to him, satisfied. “That’s the smell of devil’s dropwort. It’s a plant that only grows around clean water—meaning there’s a source of water nearby.”

The children were caught up in boisterous admiration.

“All right, let’s find the water,” he went on. “Follow the smell and the sound. But remember, you can’t focus solely on that. We don’t want to be so caught up in finding water that we run into beasts and fiends unprepared.”

“Okay,” the kids replied. Their noses twitched, and they cupped their ears as they attempted to pin down the water’s location.

As he watched over them, Belgrieve thought back to when he would venture into the mountains with Angeline. Angeline was the sort who would remember

anything after doing it once. It wasn't long at all before she could identify the herbs and wildflowers, and then discern directions from how those plants grew. In no time at all, she had picked up the techniques for concealment and sensing other presences, and made them her own. Thinking back on it now, that was more than could be attributed to a child's high learning capabilities.

Angeline was a bundle of talent; she now had her S-Rank to show for it. The daughter of an adventurer-wannabe who had failed at the onset had reached S-Rank—he could hardly believe it himself.

Am I jealous of my own daughter? Belgrieve offered himself a mocking laugh. *If only I had my right leg.* He shook those thoughts from his head—there was no turning back the clock. And if he hadn't lost his leg and returned to Turnera, he would never have met Angeline.

"What's done is done," he muttered, though it sounded as if he was trying to convince himself.

It was around that time that Pete called out, "Uncle Bell! There it is! I see the water!"

"Oh, good work." Returning to his senses, Belgrieve looked around attentively to make sure none of the children had strayed before urging them onward to where the small, clear stream flowed.

There was ample devil's dropwort growing on its bank, filling the air with a vivid, piercing scent. Sugar lotuses sprouted from the water, each a hefty stalk atop which a single small white flower bloomed. Once dried and boiled, devil's dropwort was effective in soothing the lungs, nose, and windpipe. On the other hand, sugar lotus had no notable medicinal properties, but its petals were sweet, and nice to chew on.

Belgrieve instructed the children to gather the devil's dropwort. They snacked on lotus petals as they worked, making sure not to collect too much to cause harm to the plants.

"Don't stray too far away."

"Okay."

"We knooow."

Their replies were energetic, if nothing else. Belgrieve shrugged, then found a nearby fallen tree to take a seat upon. The quiet was punctuated only by the running water, the leaves shaking in the branches, and the children romping around. He felt strangely refreshed. Was it because he was next to the river?

He quietly closed his eyes. And then, he felt something was off—a presence, and definitely not a good one. Belgrieve opened his eyes and shot up.

“Is everyone here?” he asked.

The merry children exchanged looks at Belgrieve’s sudden dreadful tone.

“Linus isn’t here.”

Pete’s statement was followed by a scream. “Aaaah! Uncle Bell!”

Seven-year-old Linus burst through the thicket. A wolf with an ashen pelt jumped out after him. It was a fiend called a grayhund, and it was pouncing with clear hostility and murderous intent.

I was careless! Belgrieve clicked his tongue as he launched off the ground. Using his right leg’s prosthetic as a support, he kicked at the ground again and again with his left leg to achieve a tremendous speed.

The moment Linus was within his grasp, he drew his sword and sliced the grayhund in two. He immediately focused his senses on his surroundings. There didn’t seem to be any additional fiends.



In his moment of relief, the stone he set his peg leg down on just so happened to be wet, causing him to do a magnificent tumble straight into the river.

“U-Uncle!”

“Linus!”

“Are you okay?!”

The kids frantically gathered around the water.

The stream was shallow, so there was no risk of drowning. However, he had landed bottom first and came out completely soaked. Thankfully, it was summer, but he had not brought a change of clothing.

Linus clung to him in tears.

“Could’ve handled that better...” Belgrieve muttered as he patted the boy on the head.

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The covered wagon rattled and shook.

Four days after the town of Asterinos was beset by giga ants, Angeline returned to the capital of Orphen. She got her baggage in order and set off for Turnera, this time for certain. She had taken an entire month off—more than enough to take it easy. After a bit of thought, she decided she would surprise Belgrieve with her sudden return and did not send a letter.

The guild executives made sour faces once they heard of her month-long absence, but given all of her achievements, they could not flatly turn her down. Lamenting their lack of personnel and praying that nothing drastic would happen in the meantime, the guild ultimately gave their seal of approval. After all, the air around her made it clear she would have smashed the guild into a million pieces had they said anything to the contrary.

The carriage leisurely proceeded down the country road. By now, Angeline was so far out in the countryside it could very well be called the middle of nowhere. A bellowing breeze rustled the grass of the unkept plains, and in the distance, she could see goats munching on wild plants. In spite of the midsummer sun pouring down on her, the cool winds ensured she wasn’t

sweating too heavily, especially when she sheltered in the shade of the canopy.

A week had gone by since she left Orphen. She had passed through a number of towns and villages. If there was a stagecoach headed in the right direction, she would hop aboard. Otherwise, she would negotiate with peddlers, offering her services as a guard. The wagon she was in now belonged to a peddler she met in Bordeaux, which was the largest town in the area. She was just one village stop away from Turnera.

As her means of transportation were limited to foot and horse, and Turnera was near the northern border with elf territory, it took a fair amount of time to get there. With her return trip in mind, perhaps she could stay for three, four days at most. But that was enough. She was fine, so long as she could take in a bit of the village air and see Belgrieve.

The truth of the matter was that if she had a horse race full speed down a straight path, she would have arrived quite a bit faster, but riding was not Angeline's strong suit. It was not that she couldn't ride, but she grew fearful the longer she clung to a horse racing at a speedy gallop.

Turnera had no horse-riding tradition, though they did keep sheep and goats, and even used donkeys to pull their wagons. Perhaps she would have grown used to riding had she started at a young age. However, when the fastest thing she had ever ridden had been a donkey, a racing horse made it feel like her body was being carried away, leaving her mind behind—an unsettling feeling. Even seemingly invincible S-Rank adventurers had their weaknesses.

Her large bag was stuffed full of gifts for the people back home—plant seeds, fabric, books, spices, and wine, along with a load of preserved pastries and sugar candies. Angeline grinned from ear to ear as she imagined snacking on the sweets with her father as they told tales of their time apart.

Seeing her beaming, the peddler gripping the reins—a woman with short blue hair—struck up a conversation. “You’re in quite a good mood, missy.”

“I am... I can finally go home.”

The peddler hummed in acknowledgment. “Returning to your hometown? You adventurers are a busy bunch, aren’t you? These days, especially.”

“My thoughts exactly... You can’t imagine how many times I’ve had to put off this trip due to urgent requests, but I can finally see my father... Have you heard of him? He’s Belgrieve, the Red Ogre.” Once again, Angeline’s affection barged its way into the conversation.

The peddler veered the horse with a smile. “Nah, I’m not too knowledgeable about those things. I don’t know him, but I’ll try to remember. He must be quite a strong adventurer.”

“Yes, I’m proud to be his daughter. Remember him, okay? It’s Belgrieve, the Red Ogre.”

“Belgrieve the Red Ogre. Got it.”

I’ve never heard that name before, the peddler thought. But she was a merchant, and she knew to hide such thoughts behind a business smile. Still, she knew of Angeline, the Black-Haired Valkyrie, and if he was a man worthy of Angeline’s praise, he was sure to be a formidable fighter who was simply unknown to the world at large.

Soon, they were out of the plains and into the mountains. This was still a public highway, but it rarely saw any traffic, so the carriage rattled fiercely from all the potholes and rocks in the road. They could not pick up speed at the risk of toppling sideways.

Despite the cloth on the floor, it still hurt to sit. Angeline was used to moving all over for her quests, but at this rate, perhaps she was better off on her feet. She jumped down and began walking beside the carriage—it was going slow enough to keep up without much effort.

The peddler offered a wry smile. “Sorry about the road.”

“No, it’s not your fault...”

But as she walked, Angeline suddenly got the sense that someone was watching her. She swiftly scanned the area. It didn’t seem to be a fiend—she could feel human presences in the mountain crags and the shadows of the trees.

“Hey...” She turned to the peddler. “Is there a village around here...?”

“No, not that I know of.”

Then they were bandits, no doubt about that. She could sense the hostility in their gazing eyes. She hadn't heard of any bandits having a hideout around these parts; perhaps they had come recently, or were the wandering sort.

Angeline jumped back onto the carriage and whispered, “There are bandits watching us...”

“Eh?!”

“Shh. Calm down... You'll be fine with me around. Pretend you don't know,” Angeline reassured her as she placed a hand on her sword.

While the peddler looked anxious, she kept the carriage on course. The terrible road conditions still made it hard to move forwards, and as she anxiously grappled with the horse, she heard the sound of something slicing through the wind.

Angeline unleashed her sword and cut down the arrow flying towards them.

“Eek!” the peddler cried, drawing a small cross with her fingers. “Oh, Lady Vienna. Please offer us protection...”

“If only they had just kept quiet and watched...” Angeline furrowed her brow with clear distaste. She had taken up jobs to exterminate criminal organizations and groups of bandits before. This would not be her first time killing humans, but she would always feel sick afterward. She raised her voice, hoping her intimidation would put an end to the matter.

“Oi! Do you attack knowing I am the Black-Haired Valkyrie Angeline, daughter of Belgrieve the Red Ogre?! If you don't want to die, then scram!” Their response came in the form of a volley of arrows. There were scores of them, but she cut them all down and yelled, “Can't you tell how pointless this is?!”

Then, there was silence. She could feel the eyes leaving. It seemed they had given up. Angeline sighed in relief and returned her sword to its scabbard. But it was not long before she heard a heartrending cry from the bandit encampment. “Save me! Save me!”

Angeline turned, startled. She could not see anything, but it sounded like a

child. Was this a kidnapping?

She hesitated a moment. Turnera was only a few days away. She did not want to throw herself into any new trouble now. But Belgrieve would not be proud of her if she pretended that she heard nothing and went on her way. He would not praise her for that.

Angeline was to be an adventurer who showed concern for the weak and downtrodden—she had promised Belgrieve as much.

She bit her lip. *I'll clean up and hurry on. A slight detour is nothing. One short stop on the road to Turnera.*

"Wait here," she said after a moment's reflection.

"Hm? Oh, sure."

Leaving the peddler behind, Angeline kicked off the ground. With her dazzling speed, she had climbed up to the bandits' hiding spot in the blink of an eye. The bandits, meanwhile, were losing their minds over her sudden appearance and making a huge ruckus.

In their midst was a bespectacled girl, around fifteen years of age. Her hands were tied behind her back, and they were trying to gag her mouth. The girl was kicking and thrashing however she could. She wore pretty, well-tailored clothes with blue as the base color—a noble, perhaps.

Angeline turned her sword on the bandits.

"If you don't want to die, leave her and get lost..." she spoke slowly.

The bandits were taken aback; however, the moment they realized that Angeline was after the girl, they immediately pressed a knife against their hostage.

"Hey, you! I don't know who you think you are, but one funny move and I'll —"

His head left his body before he could finish. No one knew what had happened—a head was simply gone from where it had been before, and a fountain of blood had erupted.

"I'm in a very bad mood right now..."

Before they knew it, Angeline was standing beside the bandit who had taken the girl hostage. The girl was in a daze as Angeline lifted her under one arm and swayed with the footwork of a vengeful spirit.

“That’s enough... I’ve warned you three times now. That’d try even the patience of Vienna above... I’ll make you regret underestimating me!”

What followed could not be called a battle. It was a slaughter. Close to twenty bandits were overwhelmed without any effective means to defend themselves, and in the span of but a few minutes were reduced to silent husks. It was their mistake; their greed had gotten the better of them. After finishing one job, they set their sights on a peddler and her guard—seemingly a prime target. It just so happened that their prey turned out to be a monster.

After achieving an easy win with her overwhelming might, Angeline let out a fed-up sigh. “Ah... I can never get used to this killing. It’s just not for me...”

She swung her sword to rid it of blood and returned it to her scabbard. Then, she untied the gag and the rope on the girl.

“Are you okay...?”

“Ack... Th-Thank you...” the girl said, staring vexedly at the marks the rope had left on her wrists. She was beautiful; her platinum-blond hair in a half-ponytail was somewhat begrimed, but it maintained its gloss, and her skin was pristine. She had to be someone of high stature.

“Why did those bandits capture you...?”

“Yes, about that...”

The girl introduced herself as Seren. She was apparently the daughter of the lord of Bordeaux. While she was in the midst of her routine inspection of the land, she had received word that her father was bedridden in critical condition. She hopped on the fastest horse she could find but was apprehended by bandits along the way. This all stemmed from the fact that she insisted a carriage would not make it in time. She hopped on a horse herself and only took a few guards with her, all of whom had perished in an ambush along the poor roads. Alone and unable to resist, they had taken her.

“How unsightly of me... Now that it’s come to this, I won’t be able to see

father anyways,” Seren said, clenching her fist. She did not cry, but it was clear that intense anger and sorrow swirled within her.

Angeline mulled this over. “You want to see your father?”

“Yes... But what’s done is done. I have no horse, and no matter how fast I might travel, it would take over four days to reach Bordeaux on foot. This is fate.”

Seren played it off with a smile. Finally, Angeline snapped, grabbed Seren by the arm, and pulled her to her feet. The girl’s blue eyes were spinning in shock.

“Um, er, Angeline...?”

“And you’re fine with that?! Isn’t he your precious father?! Don’t just give in to fate!”

Angeline picked her up and slid her way down to the carriage below. The peddler jumped up with a start when Angeline practically pounced into the carriage.

“Whoa, you surprised me there! What’s wrong, missy? What about the bandits?!”

“I took care of them. I will pay for your entire stock, and I’ll pay you for the labor too. I will do everything in my power to ensure you make a profit. Please, turn back...”

“Wh-What do you mean?”

The peddler looked between Angeline and Seren, confused. Seren was opening and closing her mouth wordlessly, unable to follow what was going on herself.

Angeline held Seren close and said, “This girl needs to see her sick father. Please...”

“Right, I’m on it,” the peddler replied after a moment. “You’re paying for everything, right?”

“Yeah.”

The peddler sighed and turned the carriage around. They proceeded down

the rattly path just a little faster than they had come.

Angeline's shoulders drooped. Going to Bordeaux ensured she would not be able to make it to Turnera—she did not have enough vacation days. Once again, she was unable to see Belgrieve. But surely, he would not have been pleased if he knew Angeline had abandoned Seren to meet him.

When she looked down, she saw that Seren was crying. The courageous girl who had stifled her emotions was now bawling her eyes out in her arms. Angeline sighed, but didn't feel this was the wrong choice.

I'm sorry, father. It will have to be another time. But I will come home someday.

The carriage snaked its way back down the mountain path.

Chapter 4: By the Time Summer Had Entered Full Swing

By the time summer had entered full swing, an uncharacteristically long letter arrived from Angeline. It was as if she was jotting down everything she never got the opportunity to write about before. Belgrieve took his time reading through it, then re-read it even more slowly.

“I should have taught her proper writing too,” he concluded.

It was full of misspellings, and it was hard to call her penmanship tidy by any means. However, the letter was overflowing with her thoughts and emotions.

“She’s doing her best out there.”

He couldn’t contain his laughter when he read through her rant on how she had failed to return for a third time, only to grimace a bit when he remembered he himself had also fallen into dismay as he anxiously awaited her return. Belgrieve grew a little sorrowful when he read about her defeating a wyvern and giga ant colony without breaking a sweat; it occurred to him, *Anything I can teach her won’t be useful to her anymore*. Watching a child’s growth wasn’t always sunshine and rainbows, and it came with its fair share of loneliness too.

In any case, he would have to send a reply. He wrote slowly and thoughtfully. Up until now, his letters had always been simple and to the point—he didn’t want to suddenly inflict her with homesickness after all—but a letter this long needed a mindful reply.

He wrote line upon line of everything that happened in the village, everything on his mind, and whatever words of encouragement he could offer. Once he was done, he tucked it away and stretched. Perhaps he would add to it later, but for now, he stood and walked out of his house.

It was already night by then, and while the sky was dotted with stars, it was still terribly dark. A forest grew behind his house, and from the branches of the trees dangled quite a number of wooden logs suspended from ropes—more

than thirty in all.

Belgrieve stepped into the center of them, removed his sheathed sword, and used it to strike one. The log flew in the opposite direction, of course, but it swung back towards him on the rope.

He struck another one, then another. The logs would fly this way and that way, but they would always find their way back to Belgrieve. He would then dodge, parry or sidestep.

There was no way he could have relied on his sight in the darkness, and yet Belgrieve continued to elude the irregular swings of the wood assailing him. He managed to do so even as the logs smacked into one another, suddenly changing their trajectories.

Eventually, the logs began to calm. Their swings grew smaller and smaller until they had finally stopped.

Belgrieve sighed and said, "I'm losing my edge." He rubbed his shoulder—the one place a log had managed to strike. "I can't let Ange laugh at me."

He struck the logs again. Practicing his sword swings had always been part of his daily routine, but when he devoted himself to training like this, it brought him back to the days he had first tried to make it as an adventurer.

The next day, he was grimacing at his muscle pains as he walked out into the fields.

"Dammit, I really have lost it..."

However, he was also relieved that it had taken only a day for the muscle pains to set in. The farmers from his same generation would laugh and say, "You know you're really getting old when even the pain is running behind." Compared to them, his own body was still robust.

He had to regain his instincts, and he would need real combat for that. While he was already beyond the ripe age of forty, he was seeking out stimulation like a young boy. *Are Angeline's exploits having an impact on me at my age?* he thought as he kneaded his beard.

As he wiped off the sweat he had worked up by tending to the field, he saw

Barnes rushing over.

“My old man’s calling for you, Mr. Bell.”

“Kerry?”

He followed Barnes to where Kerry was making quite a conflicted face. Sitting beside him was Maurice the priest and a number of lumberjacks he recognized.

“What’s got you all gathered here?”

“Yeah, about that, Bell. Word is a fiend’s been showing up around the forests.”

Oh really? Belgrieve wondered. It had occurred to him when he guided the children through the mountain the other day that the number of fiends was definitely on the rise. He had forbidden the children from entering the mountains since, but it seemed the fiends had finally made it to the outskirts of the village.

It was the lumberjacks who ran into the fiend. There had only been one foe, and the men had been armed with axes, so they managed to drive it off; however, they now hesitated to return to those woods.

“See, we’ve got to rebuild the church for the autumn festival, and we’ve been talking about constructing a school too. We need lumber, but that’s not happening at this rate.”

“I do feel bad for calling you every time, Bell. But fiends are more than what we—”

Bell cut off the lumberjacks there. “Don’t worry about it. What did the fiend look like?”

“Looked like a wolf—a gray one. We only saw one of them, but it might be part of a pack.”

grayhunds... Alone, they were only E-Rank on the adventurer scale, but they were dangerous enough to untrained villagers. Belgrieve nodded and turned towards Maurice, the priest.

“Father, could you muster up some fiend-warding measures, just in case?”

“Understood.” The priest meekly nodded.

“I want everyone to help you put up defenses.”

“Hey, Bell. Are you gonna be all right on your own? We ain’t used to battle, but if it’s just to make up the numbers...”

“Yeah, we know our way around the forest pretty well...”

The lumberjacks offered their services, but Belgrieve firmly turned them down with a smile. He would be fine with an adventurer watching his back, but having to fight while defending inexperienced lumberjacks would just make the task more dangerous.

“I’ll be just fine. Focus on protecting the village. Not to mention,” Belgrieve said with a grin, “I was just in the mood for a workout.”

All those gathered gulped at the adventurer’s visage that Belgrieve rarely showed.

Once he was back home, Belgrieve changed from his work clothes into a more mobile ensemble. He took his sword in hand and hung pouches containing various tools from his belt. It had been a while since he had gone out fiend hunting like this. It had happened a handful of times since he returned to Turnera, but those occasions were few and far between. Each time, he would feel an excitement that he thought had left him long ago. *How am I going to fight? What new tricks shall we test out?* It was as if his fifteen-year-old self was talking to his forty-year-old bones.

He gave a wry smile and muttered to himself, “We’re not playing around here, you know?”

I know, I get it, the boy sulkily replied. Belgrieve smiled and stroked his beard. He rolled his shoulders and stamped his leg against the floor, testing his body’s condition. He felt fine and was still moving properly.

“All right... Let’s go.”

He left his house and headed for the forest. The village of Turnera faced the eastern side of the mountain. A dense forest sprawled around its base and was climbing its way up the slope. The other side of the village was made up of flat

land, sparsely dotted by small trees.

The moment he stepped in the woods, the air was filled by peculiarly chilly air. It was far colder than when he had brought the children, despite the fact that the hottest days of summer were upon them.

“Hmm...” Belgrieve pictured what sort of fiend it could be as he warily pressed on. He already had a vague inkling when he first heard the story, but it seemed something greater than a grayhound was lurking.

Gradually, he began to feel presences surrounding him. Suddenly, standing on a ledge above him was a fiend clad in silver fur and cloaked in a layer of frigid air—an icehund.

“I knew it... Did you come from up north, big guy?” Belgrieve asked, drawing his sword.

An icehund was a C-Rank fiend. It boasted the appearance of a great silver-white wolf, its body was constantly surrounded by cold, and it could exhale a freezing breath from its mouth. It was far more dangerous than any of the E-Rank fiends around these parts.

Presumably, thought Belgrieve, the grayhounds and other fiends started gathering up, entranced by the mana emanating from the icehund. Lesser fiends would gather around more powerful ones, and it wasn't rare for that to someday develop into a colony.

The icehund howled, and in response, the surrounding presences flew at Belgrieve. A pack of grayhounds pounced from the shadows of the trees.

Belgrieve lowered his stance and sliced through the first, then used his peg leg as a pivot to turn and take out the one behind him. Next, he pounded his left leg against the ground to leap up. He had continued training even after losing his leg, and now he could make full use of movements only possible because there was no sense of pain in his artificial leg. The way he carried himself did not fall short of someone in perfect condition. Sliding along the ground in this manner, it was not long before he had exterminated the last grayhound. He glared at their leader.

“Still watching from on high, eh? Pretty stuck up, ain'tcha.”

The icehund growled. It now recognized Belgrieve not as prey, but as a foe it needed to defeat. What had been sneering eyes now looked down upon him with sharp hostility. In an instant, it was bounding down the ledge with the force of an avalanche. The cold air around it howled, blowing against Belgrieve more forcefully than the fierce northern winds. A membrane of frost descended over the ground.

Then it roared a gravelly roar, and with it came its powerful breath. Belgrieve had been expecting this and sidestepped with ease; however, the icehund used its breath as a smokescreen, bounding straight through it. Its sharp claws and fangs glistened like ice.

That too, Belgrieve dodged as if he had seen it coming. As they crossed paths, he tossed a small ball from his pouch. The icehund had opened its maw to bite down on him, and the ball swiftly disappeared down its throat.

The fiend burst into a coughing fit. He had fed it a pill made of a compound of chili pepper, onion, and other impactful flavors.

“I see, so it still works on C-Ranks,” he said casually, as though this was nothing but an experiment to him.

Ever since Belgrieve lost his right leg, he had pursued another angle that would keep him from being a burden on the battlefield—he focused on knowledge. In the time it took for him to rehabilitate, he thoroughly read through books and guides on fiends, and records of past battles against them. He would repeatedly simulate countermeasures, thinking long and hard about the optimal way to fight off each new fiend he encountered in his studies.

The icehund was one of the fiends he had thought about, having already encountered them before, though only a handful of times. However, this was his first time field testing the pill.

“I should quit playing around,” he said after a moment. He had already been fishing around his pouches for the tool he would test out next before he even realized it, but he shook the thought from his head. *Carelessness will be the end of me.*

The icehund pounced at him, seething in rage. Though it seemed it could no longer muster a breath from its throat, the rush of its supple limbs made it clear

this was still a C-Rank fiend. However, its movements were far too linear.

“You’re getting too fired up for an icehund...”

Lightly twisting his body and just barely dodging, Belgrieve raised his sword and swung hard. A swipe with the strength of his entire body behind it easily separated the fiend’s head from its body. Now a corpse, the icehund’s body continued to soar with its momentum until it crashed into a tree and toppled to the ground. The cold air dispersed, and the summer season swiftly flooded the area. The layer of frost melted instantly, and Belgrieve grimaced that it had suddenly become so unpleasantly hot.

“Good grief... This heat is nauseating.”

He could not sense any other fiends around. Now that he had defeated the icehund, there wouldn’t be any other fiends attracted to its sweet mana. Belgrieve did not get chances like these often, so he took out his knife to strip it of its pelt. The icehund’s fur was a beautiful silver. There was a girl in the village who would be married soon, and surely she would be delighted at the gift.

The young, novice adventurer inside Belgrieve gave a satisfied laugh, while Belgrieve the elder smiled bitterly. He was now convinced that his daughter’s exploits were having a bad influence on him.

○

“Achoo!”

“What’s wrong, Merry? Catching a cold?”

“Nah, that shop’s air cooling magic is getting to me... It was way too cold in there.”

“Suddenly going from that to this... It’s making my body feel all out of whack.”

Angeline, Miriam, and Anessa walked the streets of downtown Orphen, complaining about the cooling magic of a restaurant they didn’t usually visit.

In the end, after saving Seren and seeing her off, Angeline was forced to return to the capital. Seren just barely managed to see her father while he was still alive. With all her gratitude, she wanted to welcome Angeline as an esteemed guest, but Angeline only partook in one dinner and refused the rest.

She did not have enough vacation days left to visit Turnera and make it back in time. And so, upon returning, Angeline spent all her remaining time writing a letter. She had always written in whatever free time she could find, and she would always have so much to share that she could barely write down any of it, but this time she decided she would just put it all down.

She wrote, erased, wrote, and erased, over and over again. This letter was different from any she'd written before, and it took close to a week for her to finish. By then her holiday was over, and she was back to her normal schedule, rushing frantically to and fro on difficult requests.

It was only yesterday she had returned from subjugating a kraken—a massive squid-like fiend—in Elvgren, a western seaport. Tomorrow, she would be headed east again. She truly was being sent off in all directions, and was kept incredibly busy. These were fiends that only high-rank adventurers could deal with, so there was little she could do about it.

In any case, she had the day off, and while of course she could not go see Belgrieve, she did not hate spending her time with her party members, who were also her good friends.

“Still, we’ve got no time to use all this money we’re earning... Not that I have anything in mind,” Anessa lamented.

Miriam smiled. “Then let’s blow through it today. There’s a cake shop I’ve been curious about.”

“That’s not even going to make a dent... What do you want to do, Ange?”

“I approve of sweets.”

“All right, it’s two against one. Off we go.”

Miriam led the other two with a skip in her step.

The cake shop was a large building facing the main road. Its freshly furnished interior was neat and tidy; customers would place whatever sweets they wanted on a tray, then take that to the register to pay for all of it. There were tables and chairs, both inside and outside the store, to eat sweets that had already been paid for.

Angeline and Miriam's eyes twinkled at the pastries that sparkled in every color of the rainbow. Though Anessa remained a step behind them, she too gulped at their splendor.



“Wow, they’re way too pretty. Tasty looking too.”

“Merry... We will have to take them all down one at a time...!”

“All right! We can do this!”

“D-Don’t overdo it, you two...”

Angeline and Miriam went around and filled their trays with whatever sweets caught their fancy, while Anessa, still pretending like she didn’t care, picked out several of her own. Regardless of being S-and AAA-Ranks, at heart, they were still young girls. After paying a fortune to the cashier, who was frozen stiff with a smile on her face at the sight of the mountains of sweets, the three headed for a table.

“A bit much, maybe?” Miriam blinked, upon looking back at her own mountain.

Angeline shook her head. “Not a problem... I’ll order some tea.”

Once the order for floral tea had been placed, they immediately dove into the incredibly sweet and delicious confections. Both Miriam and Angeline’s faces had relaxed and become slovenly messes.

“Mmm, dewishous.”

“Incredible... Anne, pass that one.”

“Hey, that’s mine... And wait, you just had lunch. Where are you two packing all that in?”

To Anessa’s question, the other two tilted their heads.

“I have a second stomach for sweets. Right, Ange?”

“That’s just common sense for a lady...”

That doesn’t make any sense, Anessa was about to say, but ultimately sighed instead. However, when she had a taste of her share, she found that it was indeed delicious, far more so than she had anticipated. Once they saw that even she had grown a little entranced, Angeline and Miriam looked at her with smug grins.

As she munched on honey sponge cake, Angeline muttered, “It’s good... I wish

I could give some to dad..."

"Right... It's a shame what happened."

"You weren't able to go home, huh?"

"Right... And I don't know when I can take my next vacation. You never know where life will take you... *Nom, nom.*" She stuffed her cheeks with a sorrowful look on her face. Anessa and Miriam exchanged wry smiles.

"But the one you saved was the daughter of Count Bordeaux, right?" Anessa tried to console her.

Angeline paused for a moment. "Who's Count Bordeaux?" she asked.

"What...? I mean, he's the lord of the northern territory that Turnera's a part of, a pretty important guy. It's kind of incredible, having connections to an influential noble."

"I couldn't care less about that...but I'm glad Seren got to see her father."

"I-I see."

Anessa's cheeks reddened a bit. She felt a bit ashamed of herself for viewing it in such a calculating way, though such an outlook should have been part and parcel of being an adventurer.

"Never mind that...!" Angeline washed down the contents of her bulging cheeks with a swig of tea. "Next time, I'll see him for sure...! If I continue completing quests at this pace, the guild can't deny my next vacation application. Mwa ha ha... Anne, Merry, just follow my lead."

That suspect laugh of Angeline's was met by a tired shake of Anessa's head. "How about you think about how we feel, being dragged around like that... Not that I really mind."

"Heh heh, I get to visit all sorts of places and eat delicious food. No objections here." Miriam laughed before taking another sweet mouthful.

In order to earn her next holiday, Angeline was taking and completing any and all quests that came in. Her speed was several times that of a normal adventurer. The way Angeline saw it, the more she achieved, the harder it would be for them to decline her requests.

As a byproduct of all her hard work—though this was supposed to be an adventurer’s main goal—she was saving up an incredible amount of money. Her equipment was already of such high quality that she hardly ever had to consider replacing it. She would frivolously splurge between quests, but was ultimately earning money faster than she could spend it.

“If it’s not going anywhere...” Anessa suddenly muttered, “maybe we should donate a bit to the orphanage.”

“Yeah, that’s right! The sister would love it,” Miriam agreed.

Angeline had never heard anything about this before. “Orphanage...?” she asked, tilting her head.

Anessa scratched her cheek awkwardly, a wry smile on her face. “Oh, we were brought up in the church’s orphanage.”

“The sister was like a mother to us. Never really had a father though.”

“Right. We barely had any money back then, so we became adventurers out of desperation.”

“Right, right. Us orphanage kids banded together, and that was our first party.”

“The sister was super against it, though.”

Anessa giggled, while Miriam giddily bit into another treat.

Angeline’s eyes narrowed. *I didn’t know about that. Come to think of it, I don’t know much at all about the two of them*, she realized. She knew that she wasn’t all that talkative herself, and having such a busy work schedule meant that their conversations always revolved around fiends and other adventurers.

With a bit of a clatter, she adjusted her chair and turned to face them candidly.

“I was abandoned. My dad picked me up in the mountains...”

“Eh?”

“Wow, that’s crazy. Tell me more!”

Anessa and Miriam leaned in, deeply intrigued.

All right. Today, I'll tell them everything—about the village, about dad, about me... And I'll ask them too—about their childhood, the orphanage, and the sister.

She ordered another cup of tea.

○

Dear Dad,

We have been having a long spell of good weather in Orphen. I fought a large bug in the east the other day. It was weak, and a little sickening to look at. I am B-Rank now. Hooray. I am doing it. I think I will eat something good to celebrate. I like sautéed duck. It is good.

○

Dear Angeline,

I am glad to know you are doing well. We have been having great weather in Turnera too. Congratulations on your promotion to B-Rank; your father is very happy to hear you are doing your best. However, these celebratory times are the times you should watch out the most. I am sure the food is good in Orphen. Please, take care of yourself.

○

Dear Dad,

I became an S-Rank the other day. I celebrated with all my friends, and it was a happy time. But I have become very busy. Snow is sprinkling here. That means it is already pure white in Turnera, right? Do not catch a cold.

○

Dear Angeline,

Congratulations! It seems that you have become first-rate while I was not looking. I am proud of you. It has been four years since you left the village. Upon receiving your letter, I imagined how you would look now, and threw a modest celebration of my own. I know that you are busy, but please, do not push yourself too hard. I am rooting for you.

○

Dear Dad,

I'm sorry I could not send a letter. I am very busy.

I bought a new sword. It was made of iron from eastern parts and is a good sword. I have been fighting stronger fiends since I became an S-Rank. I have good equipment now. It feels completely different when I hold it and swing it. That is a load off my mind. Better to be safe than worry, as they say.

○

Dear Angeline,

What wonderful news. It is not often that an adventurer is blessed with a good sword. You are entrusting your life to it, so please maintain it and treasure it. Turnera is already deeply entrenched in the winter weather. Perhaps it is a little warmer in Orphen? Still, look out for yourself, and take care you do not catch a cold. Also, the saying is "better safe than sorry."

○

Dear Dad,

I plan to take a vacation at the end of the month to return to Turnera. I have a lot of things to tell you.

○

Dear Dad,

I am sorry I could not return. The truth is, I received a sudden quest. A fiend called a wyvern appeared, so I had to go to Garuda to kill it. I will take another vacation, and return. For sure this time.

○

Dear Angeline,

I was worried that something had happened to you, but I am relieved to hear that it is business as usual. I know that you are busy, but do not forget that there are people saved by your efforts. You are doing a wonderful job. There is no need to rush home. I will always be waiting.

Dear Dad,

I've finally gotten quite fed up with not being able to come home. I always have so much to write that I don't know what to say, and it always turns out too short, but this time I've decided to just write everything. I don't even know where to start! I have lots of things to talk about, and when I try writing about one thing, another thing pops up!

First off, as for why I could not come home. The first time was a wyvern. I wrote about that, yes? I took another vacation after that and bought gifts for everyone back home. I thought I would surprise you, so I didn't write a letter.

When I was waiting for the stagecoach, this girl from the guild came up and said Asterinos was in trouble. I was disappointed because I thought I could go home, but if I ignored them I figured you wouldn't praise me for that, so I did my best. I went there and fought in the city surrounded by giga ants. There were a lot of them, but they were just ants, after all. It wasn't too hard. I took them out with my comrades.

I hurried back from Asterinos, argued that the quest had postponed my vacation, and left straight away. I rode stagecoaches and hitched rides with peddlers, and it was all going well. But along the way, I saved a girl who had been captured by bandits. She was in a hurry to see her father who was sick in Bordeaux, so we turned back to Bordeaux even though that meant I couldn't go home anymore. I did not have enough days off. Still, I'm glad that Seren (that's the girl's name) got to see her father, so I'm happy I saved her.

As you can see, I've tried to return three times and failed every time. The great gods and the spirits, they're all such meanies to me.

Still, my adventurer work is fun. Now, it's nothing but fiend hunts, but it used to be herb gathering and dungeon exploration. Lately, I've been wanting to try my hand at that again.

The things you've taught me have been very useful. When I first came to Orphen, I was the best at herb gathering! I found so much devil's dropwort and almea grass in such a short time, the lady at the desk was speechless. I'm still proud of that.

Next, I will write about my friends.

There are all sorts of people at Orphen's guild, but only two I really hang out with. Listen to this, after becoming S-Rank, I formed my first party! At first, I wasn't sure about fighting alongside other people, but now, I find them very reliable.

We have an archer called Anessa, and a magician called Miriam. I call them Anne and Merry. Anne is older and like a big sister. She takes care of all the hard talks with the clients, and she's diligent and reliable, but she turns red when you tease her. I can't help but tease her now and then. She's amazing with a bow, and always hits everything she sets her aim on. When I'm fighting out front, she accurately provides support from behind. It is very reassuring.

Merry is a year older than me, but she's even smaller than I am. But her boobs are bigger. Why is this? I do not know. I have hopes for the future. I am still a growing girl. Yes. No. We were not talking about boobs. We were talking about Merry.

Merry is very fluffy, and a little out of it, but she's fun to talk to. Her skill in magic is incredible. She wields a staff taller than I am, and it's cool to see her swing it around. Her specialty is lightning magic, and she can use it to clear up small fries in the blink of an eye.

Also, she likes sweet things. We are often on the same wavelength, and we work together to tease Anne. We got together to eat sweet things on our last day off. With plenty of sugar. And honey. It was delicious. I want you to have a taste too, dad, one of these days.

Right, since we're talking about food, there's a tavern I often go to. The master isn't the friendliest, and I haven't talked much with him, but his food is very good. He has the best sautéed duck, and I eat it all the time. I used to go there when I wanted to treat myself, but now I have money so I can go whenever I want. Sometimes, I find myself longing for the elaeinia—am I spelling that right? The birds we used to eat in Turnera. It is delicious when you dip soft bread in their oil!

Oh, that's right. I also miss the mutton and jarlberry stew we used to eat together. There is not much jarlberry growing around Orphen. Even though it's

so tasty. I wonder why. It's a mystery.

Writing this has reminded me of all the food in Turnera. The food in Orphen might be more complex, or extravagant, or whatnot, but I want to eat your cooking, dad. I want to eat cowberries. And mountain grapes, and akebia. We have them over here, dried out or preserved in sugar, but they're just not the same as the freshly picked fruit.

I was really frustrated that I could not go home. I want to talk to you directly, dad. Not through letters. There are loads of things I can't convey here. It's so bothersome. I want to see you. I'll be back next time for sure. Please wait for me.

o

Dear Angeline,

Thank you for the letter. I was a bit worried and was relieved to hear that you hadn't been injured. As your father, I did not want to make you feel homesick, so I always kept my letters short. However, you took the time to write out your thoughts, so I think I will write a little more than usual.

It is summer here in Turnera, and everything has turned green. It's the season for sheep shearing. I know we never had any sheep of our own, but do you remember when we went to Kerry's place to help out? The sheep look so relieved and free once they've lost all that thick, heavy coating. When you first held those shearing scissors, the sheep ran out of fear, and it was a trial and a half to get them back. I was just remembering things.

Raike and Mel got married. I'm sure you remember since you were always playing with them. Remember how they always got along? I guess it's not so surprising, after all. Please offer them a prayer.

I sent them an icehund pelt for their wedding. The fiend appeared in the forest not so long ago, and it caused a bit of a ruckus, but I managed somehow or another. Perhaps I felt you were doing so much, and I couldn't fall behind. It's a bit embarrassing when I put it down in words.

I'm sorry to say this, but I laughed a bit when I heard you failed three times. However, your deeds were splendid each time, and I am very proud of you.

There are many adventurers out there who only ever think about themselves, but your father thinks that strong adventurers ought to help out those in need. I'm very happy that you're taking those words to heart. Thank you.

I'm glad you've found good friends. Just have fun with them, and your father will be satisfied.

I'm not going anywhere, and neither is Turnera. Take your time, know your limits, and please, return at your own pace. Then, I'll make a jarlberry stew for you.

Look after yourself. I'm looking forward to our reunion.

Chapter 5: Summer Had Entered, Then Left Its Peak

Summer had entered, then left its peak, and the signs of fall grew closer each day.

After slaying the icehund, Belgrieve patrolled the forest and mountain several more times, taking out a few grayhunds along the way. It was not long before there weren't any more fiends drawn by the icehund's mana, and the lumberjacks could get back to their usual schedule. They chopped down trees, brought them back to the village, and processed them to pretty up the church for the autumn festival. Construction of a school right next to the church had begun as well; Maurice, the priest, earnestly wanted to give the children an education.

Fall was when the greatest of harvests could be reaped from the mountain. Knowing the fiends were all gone, Belgrieve led the children once more to collect grapes, mushrooms, akebia, and cowberries, along with other edible plants.

"These two mushrooms might look similar, but you see the black spots that form when you cut it? This one is poisonous. Don't eat it."

"What about this one, Uncle Bell?"

"That one might look toxic, but it's delicious. Everyone, chew on the poisonous mushrooms a bit to remember their taste. Don't swallow. If your body remembers, you can avoid the danger. You must train your senses."

"Okay!"

"It's surprisingly tasty for a poisonous mushroom."

"Yeah, not half bad."

"Hey, no swallowing. You got that? Just remember the taste."

"We know!"

They left the mountain in good spirits, their baskets piled high. This time the

climb hadn't gotten them nearly as sweaty as it had under the summer sun. They did still sweat, of course, and it was enough for their clothes to stick to their skin, but this only made the gentle, refreshing breeze feel perfectly pleasant.

Once back in the village, Belgrieve happily watched the children sprint off to their houses with their spoils. They would brag to their families with proud smiles and receive praise for their pickings.

"Off to the fields for me..." Once Belgrieve returned, however, he immediately changed into his work clothes, and left for the parcel of land out back. The sweet potato vines had grown with such fecundity that they would swallow the field whole. By contrast, the summer vegetables had lost some of their momentum, though they were still bearing fruit.

He plucked the weeds and pulled back some of the vines. Seeing that the turnip and cabbage seeds he planted had begun to sprout, he let out a sigh of relief.

"It's become a fine plot of land now."

Year after year, Belgrieve would expand his field ever so slightly. He had only claimed this corner three years prior. At first, the soil was hard, and all sprouts were immediately eaten up by bugs, but his patient and careful work eventually paid off. By now, it could easily bear fine produce.

The residents of Turnera were generally self-sufficient. The strain of wheat that served as their staple food took up quite a bit of land, so the villagers would work together on that field in particular. However, they would all have to grow any other staple crops for themselves.

Belgrieve had to sow seeds all year round to ensure his vegetable supply didn't run out. He would remove the withered ones from each crop, and till the field once again; whatever he didn't use would be preserved, and sold to peddlers who came through. In any case, everything started and ended with farm work. Whatever time wasn't spent training, patrolling, or venturing into the mountains, Belgrieve would devote to his fields.

After he'd made his rounds of the entire field, weeding and tying supports, Belgrieve returned to the house. He savored a cowberry from the mountains

and sighed—each time he ate one, he would be reminded of Angeline.

“She always did love them... You can’t get them fresh in the capital.”

Cowberries were pleasantly sweet and sour when fresh, but they didn’t last for long. It was impossible to pick cowberries around the capital, so they were either made into jam, pickled, or dried. This was done in Turnera as well, at least for the winter, but Angeline liked freshly picked cowberries the most. That delighted face she made whenever she ate them made Belgrieve happy too.

“When will she be back...?”

She had been gone for five years now, but hardly a day passed without that thought crossing his mind, though he would always clamp down on it. However, now that Angeline had recently shown a desire to return, Belgrieve couldn’t help but to be conscious of it. In short, he was lonely.

“Did I really turn out to be such a worrywart...?” he muttered with a wry smile, twisting the red hairs of his beard.

Suddenly, he heard a spirited voice cry out from up front. “Is anyone home?!” Belgrieve was startled to his feet. He didn’t recognize the voice, but it sounded feminine.

Who could it be? he wondered as he answered the door. There, he found a lone girl standing boldly with her hands on her hips, wearing mostly orange clothes of the finest material.

She was around seventeen or eighteen and her platinum-blond hair had been done up in a chignon behind her head. Her features were refined, while her eyes reflected a firm sense of nobility. Yet, even so, she had a sword at her waist. She was a head shorter than Belgrieve, which meant she was on the taller side for a woman.

Belgrieve was surprised to be visited by someone he had no recollection of but kept his composure as he greeted her. “Good day. Who might you be?”

The girl’s perfectly straight posture bent into a courteous bow. There was a hint of elegance in her gestures. “Please forgive me for my sudden unannounced visit. Am I correct in assuming that this is the residence of Belgrieve the Red Ogre?”

“R-Red Ogre...? I’m definitely Belgrieve, but...” That moniker took him by surprise, but it did seem she had business with him.

“Oh my.” The girl sounded impressed. “I can definitely see why they call you the Red Ogre, what with that splendid red hair of yours...”

Belgrieve paused for a moment. “Are you under some kind of misunderstanding?” he asked.

“Hmm? You mean to tell me there are several Belgrieves in this village?”

“No, as far as I know, I should be the only Belgrieve here, but... Red Ogre?”

He had absolutely no idea what she was talking about. Who had ever called him that, and when? Belgrieve tilted his head, and the girl seemed rather perplexed as well.

“Um... I heard you were the father of the S-Rank adventurer Angeline, the Black-Haired Valkyrie...”

Belgrieve opened his mouth blankly. “Yes, well, Angeline is definitely...my...daughter,” he said, though he was starting to lose confidence. His own daughter was an S-Rank adventurer. He was certainly proud of her, but it all sounded like some tall tale, some barefaced lie. It just felt unreal when he said it aloud.

However, the girl seemed satisfied with his answer. “I knew it!” She nodded, having evidently reached her own conclusions. Belgrieve got the feeling they weren’t quite seeing eye to eye, and come to think of it, he still didn’t even know who she was.

“Let’s back up a bit... Who are you?”

The girl placed a hand to her mouth, taken aback. “H-How could I have been so rude as to neglect to introduce myself?! I didn’t mean to keep you waiting. I am Sasha Bordeaux, second daughter of Count Bordeaux.”

Amazed, Belgrieve hurriedly bowed his head. “You were the lord’s daughter... I didn’t know, but I’ve treated you rather rudely...”

“Oh no, no, no, not at all! Raise your head! House Bordeaux is greatly indebted to Miss Angeline, and the same goes for you, her father!”

“I see... Well, there’s no use standing around here...”

Still confused, Belgrieve invited Sasha into the house. He brewed fragrant herbal tea and arranged a plate of cowberries, grapes, and akebia.

“I’m sorry this is all I can offer.”

“No, don’t mind me at all!”

Sasha politely lowered her head. In fact, she genuflected so deeply, Belgrieve had to wonder if she really did hail from such a prestigious house. Furthermore, he did not know anything about Angeline being the benefactor of House Bordeaux. What had she done now?

After watching Sasha gleefully snack on the cowberries, Belgrieve hesitantly spoke up. “So, Sasha, what business do you have with me...?”

She snapped to, having been completely entranced in the berries. Her cheeks reddened a bit as she cleared her throat and attempted to regain her dignity. Once again, she inclined her head.

“Sir Belgrieve, not only did your daughter save my little sister Seren Bordeaux from bandits, but she also delivered her to our sick and bedridden father Count Bordeaux. No amount of gratitude is enough.”

“A sickness... Is Count Bordeaux all right?”

Sasha offered a sad smile. “After seeing Seren for one last time, he embarked on his journey to Almighty Vienna without any regrets.”

“I see... May he go forth with Vienna’s guidance.”

“Thank you.” They both drew small crosses in the air before Sasha went on. “I had been out dealing with fiends at the time, so I was unable to meet Miss Angeline. However, I was told she adamantly declined any reward and said that if we really had to give something, it should go to her father Belgrieve.”

“I don’t know what to say...”

So this was what Angeline meant when she wrote about saving a girl and delivering her to her father. Belgrieve wished she wouldn’t leave out the important parts, but still, he felt proud of his daughter’s achievements and how she had grown to be a responsible girl. A smile began to crack his stern facade.

Sasha produced a small sack from her breast pocket and placed it on the table with the distinctive jingle of metal coins.

“One hundred gold coins.”

“One—?!”

“It pains my heart that this is all we can give you. Our house is going through some tough times...” Sasha said, eyes downcast in shame.

One gold coin was enough for a Turnera villager to live comfortably for a whole year. Belgrieve frantically pushed the sack away.

“I-I couldn’t possibly. I’d incur Heaven’s wrath if I accepted this much!”

“What are you saying?! Even a thousand gold coins would not be enough to exchange for Seren’s life! If you don’t accept it, you’ll tarnish the name of Bordeaux!”

For a while, they argued back and forth, but eventually, Belgrieve gave in to her pressure and accepted it. He could not even imagine what he would use one hundred gold coins for. Sure, there were plenty of avenues in the capital, but Turnera was so far out in the sticks that apart from the occasional peddler, almost everything was acquired through farming and bartering. Plenty of the villagers had never even seen a gold coin before.

Belgrieve had lost the argument, but this was a reward for Angeline, so he decided he would save it and hand it to her once she returned. He did not intend to touch it until then—nor would he have the need.

Now that the reward had been delivered, he thought Sasha would leave; on the contrary, she leaned in as if she was just getting to the main topic.

“Sir Belgrieve! I heard you instructed Angeline on the fundamentals of being an adventurer!”

“Yes, well... That was when she was small.”

“I’m embarrassed to admit it, but I’m something of an adventurer myself. Though I’m ashamed to say I’m only AA-Rank...”

Belgrieve couldn’t understand what was so embarrassing about that. She was quite the ambitious lady—most adventurers would only reach C-Rank or B-Rank

in their lifetimes. He played it off with a chuckle.

Sasha fidgeted until she finally gathered her nerve and looked Belgrieve in the eye. Her sharp, piercing gaze caused him to straighten his back.

“Sir Belgrieve!”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“I am well aware of how brazen this request may be...but please, I would like to receive the Red Ogre’s instruction in the way of the sword!” Sasha bowed her head even lower than before.

Belgrieve hesitated for a moment; in short, she wanted to spar with him, and he didn’t mind that. It would be a bit of good exercise. He didn’t know about that Red Ogre business, but so be it.

He gave a wry smile. “I don’t think I’m good enough to instruct you, but...if that’s all you want from me, then sure.”

Her face lit up, simply radiating joy.

“Many thanks!”

“Let’s take this outside.” He urged her out the door. The weather was nice, with the sun tipping to the west and the shadows growing longer.

Sasha removed her sword from her belt, scabbard and all. Belgrieve could not help but let slip a sigh of admiration at her stance—a beautiful form that wasted nothing. She was surely a woman of considerable strength.

Interesting. Belgrieve similarly took a stance with his sheathed sword. He stood square to her, his weight leaning slightly onto his artificial leg. The sword in his hand swished ever so slightly this way and that, as he carefully watched how Sasha reacted to each movement.

For a while, they glared at one another, measuring the distance between them. Sasha was slowly inching towards him, but Belgrieve remained motionless; at most, his body swayed a smidge.

Whether from the sun or nervousness, he could feel his sweat building up. Eventually, the sweat on his brow beaded into a droplet which trailed down his cheek to the tip of his jaw where it fell. That was when Sasha made her move.



“Hnng!”

With wonderful footwork, she had closed the distance in the blink of an eye. However, Belgrieve had been watching her every action and immediately swung his sword in response. The two blades met. They were still in their scabbards, so there was no grating of metal—they instead let off a violent and sharp smacking noise.

Immediately realizing her first blow had been parried, Sasha shifted into the second. That one too, Belgrieve averted with the least movement necessary. Then the third, then the fourth.

How many times did those scabbards meet? The clash of these two skilled warriors was something like a dance. As if hailing each other’s movements, they raced, leaped, and hopped, moving in near-perfect unison as they swung their swords from every angle, trying to draw all they could from their foe.

Sasha’s blade was fast, but so was Belgrieve’s, and his blows were heavier too. Each time she parried a slash from him, Sasha would grimace from the force. To add to this, Belgrieve’s footwork would at times depart from all standard practice—made possible only thanks to his artificial leg. This only served to tire her mind.

It was only over once she had fallen to one knee out of exhaustion, and Belgrieve placed the tip of his sheath to her throat. Struggling to breathe, she lifted a hand to signal her defeat.

“Th-This is my loss...”

Belgrieve took a moment to catch his own breath. “Phew... I’m sorry my technique’s a bit crude.” He pulled his blade back with a smile. While he was winded, he was not nearly as worn out as Sasha. Still, Sasha’s strength had been such that he would have lost had he dropped his guard for a split second. Belgrieve had the stubbornness that came with age, so he acted like he had stamina to spare, but his heart was racing, and in his head, he was congratulating himself over a hard-fought victory.

He retreated to the house and returned with a pitcher of water. He poured a cup for Sasha first, who was still on her knees catching her breath.

After downing her glass, Sasha took a deep breath and looked up at Belgrieve. "Thank you... That was splendid...as expected of Angeline's father and mentor..."

"You weren't half bad yourself, Lady Sasha. I am astounded by your skills. You would have had me if I made a single mistake."

"Heh heh, you are too humble. I thought, with some luck, I could get a single strike in. I'm ashamed of my own naivete... I must admit, I'd never heard of you before, but surely, I have neglected my studies. You were undoubtedly a famed adventurer in your heyday."

Sasha looked up at him, expectations brimming in her eyes. *You were an S-Rank, weren't you?* her gaze pleaded.

With a troubled, bitter smile, Belgrieve scratched his head. "I...was E-Rank. As you can see, I lost a leg just when I was starting out. Had to retire from the adventurer business. I've been in Turnera ever since." He held out his right prosthetic.

Sasha blinked, then swallowed her breath.

I let her down, didn't I, thought Belgrieve. But that was far better than having her overvalue him for no reason. Perhaps she would be ashamed by the fact that she lost to a mere former E-Rank, but she would probably be stronger than him if she trained just one more year. Rather, she could use this as an opportunity to strive for more. She still had much room to grow.

Contrary to Belgrieve's expectations, Sasha's eyes were sparkling again as she took Belgrieve by the hand. Her cheeks were flushed.

"I'm touched!"

"Pardon?" he said, taken aback.

"To be so strong despite your handicap... Just how much training have you done?! Not to mention, instead of going out into the world, you've devoted your entire life to protecting the village of Turnera!"

"S-Sasha...?"

"And finally, you personally raised an S-Rank adventurer! Never seeking fame

and fortune of your own, you single-mindedly strove to raise a successor and develop this small village... I, Sasha Bordeaux, have seen the light!”

“Can you listen to me?”

“I shall return with quite a story to tell... I have to broaden my field of view—I can’t just keep chasing fame. Sir Belgrieve, I know it is presumptuous of me, but I shall look up to you as my master!”

“W-Wait... Sasha? Please, just...”

“I’m sorry for taking your time with my inexperience, Master! I’ll polish my skills until the day we meet again!” Still firmly grasping Belgrieve’s hand, she roughly shook it up and down. “And now, I must take my leave,” she said, and raced off like the wind.

For a while, Belgrieve was left there, staring blankly, unable to comprehend what had just happened.

The evening sun colored the sky; his shadow grew longer still.

Finally, Barnes came to him and said, “Mr. Bell, my old man wanted to ask if you’d like to eat with... What’s wrong?”

“Have I been daydreaming this whole time?”

Barnes tilted his head bemusedly.

Chapter 6: Standing before the Marble Counter

Standing before the marble counter that still had all the cracks running through it, Angeline scowled.

“No requests?” she asked slowly.

The receptionist smiled a vague, troubled smile. “Yes. At the moment, there are no jobs that would require an S-Rank party... They’re all jobs the AA-Rank and lower adventurers can handle.”

Of course, there was no rule saying S-Ranks could not take those requests, but it was the guild’s job to make sure that work was distributed equally to as many adventurers as possible. Considering Angeline’s workload, there had been little need for her to go out of her way to challenge a lower-level request. She wasn’t troubled for money either—in fact, she had more than she knew what to do with.

“Any guard requests in the general direction of Turnera?”

“That’s not a job for an S-Rank...”

“Can I take a month off, then?” she asked after a beat.

“Th-That’s a bit... There’s no telling what will happen...”

“Tsk...”

The receptionist winced, knowing Angeline wanted to go home no matter what.

In any case, Angeline had some free time, but not enough for an extended leave of absence. Given that, she was better off hanging out with Anessa and Miriam. As she turned to leave, Angeline noted the cracked counter and narrowed her eyes.

“Isn’t it high time you got this thing fixed? I’ll foot the bill...”

“Heh heh.” The receptionist cracked a mischievous smile. “The guild master decided to leave it as one of the legendary exploits of the Black-Haired Valkyrie.

A sort of memento.”

“I see.”

So you’re just harassing me, she thought, but decided not to let it get to her. Angeline returned to her friends who were waiting in the lobby.

“Oh, how was it?” Anessa asked.

“Any good requests?” chimed Miriam.

“No, they said there were no jobs for S-Ranks. So we have the day off.”

The two of them seemed pleasantly surprised.

“Well, that was sudden...”

“Yeah... What do we do now?”

“First, let’s get home and change...”

They thought they would be out on another request, and came dressed as adventurers. However, they were not fond of walking around town in armor.

Anessa nodded. “Right. Then we’ll meet up at the usual tavern.”

“Yeah... Later.”

Angeline separated from the two of them and returned to her room. She was renting a single room in a small boarding house in the corner of downtown. Considering her revenue, she could more than afford to live in a fine house, but Angeline simply didn’t see the benefit. She felt far more settled in a room where everything was within arm’s reach.

She changed out of her adventurer gear and sat on the bed. The world outside her window was unmistakably autumnal; the trees lining the road had turned red, while the light shining through them was soft and calm. She rolled around, rereading the long letter she had received from Belgrieve. It never failed to bring a smile to her face.

After carefully folding it and tucking it away into a drawer, she lay faceup staring at the ceiling and thought to herself, *I could really go for some cowberries*. She was always looking forward to them whenever fall came in Turnera. After Belgrieve started taking her out into the mountains, the first

thing she would always do would be to search for cowberries. Even now, she could remember the abundance of nature that surrounded her there.

She'd eaten cowberry jam and dried cowberries since coming to the capital, but they lacked the striking sour-sweetness of the freshly picked ones. The taste of a fresh one would make her squeeze her cheeks, but they had the sort of allure that made her reach for one after another.

When I begged him, dad would give a troubled smile and feed them to me personally... She grew lost in her memories.

"I want to go home..."

Her homesickness grew stronger when there was nothing to do. The early-fall scenery of Turnera would color her mind when she closed her eyes. She reminisced about the changing shades of the wheat fields planted back in the spring, the flocks of sheep with slightly shaggy coats, and the young herdboys and their dogs chasing after them. Under the high blue sky and tattered clouds, the forest gradually took on shades of red and yellow, and at night, the glowgrass would give off a faint light. She remembered all the hills, big and small, that she would see when she climbed the trees to pick grapes.

She stayed there, lying on the bed for a while, but got up when she remembered her friends were waiting for her.

"When will I ever get to see dad..." She sighed and left the room.

There were many people on the streets, going every which way. Orphen was a trade center; it was so vast, it had multiple guild branches to cover it all, and enough adventurers to support all of them. The number of people she walked past could not even be compared to any other town in these parts. Angeline had been quite overwhelmed the first time she came to the capital.

It was a hassle to walk through the crowds, but the tavern wasn't far. She reached it in just under an hour. While it wasn't yet noon, the tavern was crowded and full of lively chatter. Anessa and Miriam had already saved her a seat.

"Ange, you look super ticked off." Miriam chuckled.

Angeline sullenly sipped her water. "I don't need these insignificant days off.

It's like they're mocking me..."

"Oh, don't be like that... It's not every day you get a vacation." Anessa awkwardly scratched her cheek.

Angeline shook her head. This girl just didn't get it. "This is not a vacation. A vacation would be when I'm back in Turnera, being doted on by my father..."

"What's up with that..."

"You want to be doted on? Then should I dote on you? All right, I'll hold you. Come on, upsy-daisy." Miriam grinned, reaching her hands out.

Angeline pursed her lips. "As if you could replace dad... If you think those huge tits give you some sort of maternal instinct, you're way off."

"Aww, harsh," Miriam grumbled as she leaned back in her chair. She usually wore a loose robe so that they wouldn't stand out, but it did seem she concealed splendid mounds underneath.

The three each ordered their favorites from the menu, killing time with rambling banter. However, they were adventurers through and through, and the topic naturally shifted towards fiends.

"I get the feeling the fiends are acting up as of late."

"Right, right. They didn't attack towns so often before."

Lately, a majority of the quests brought to their attention involved hunting down a fiend that appeared near some town or another. A good number of them were SOS requests after the attack had already begun.

These hadn't been very common not so long ago. The high-ranking fiends generally lived away from human habitation and kept to themselves. Any requests involving them would be from people who wanted raw materials from those fiends or wanted to develop the remote land they resided in. There were also times where certain fiends would have bounties placed on them, and higher-ranked adventurers would make a living hunting them down. Taking out a single Calamity-Class fiend would award enough money to live comfortably for half a year.

Now, however, these fiends were appearing frequently around humans. This

led to an increase in work for people like Angeline. If those powerful fiends kept to the outskirts or the depths of the dungeons, the guild would have no reason to tie down an S-Rank adventurer—they could hunt them down at their own pace.

As per usual, Angeline stuffed her cheeks with her favorite sautéed duck in ill humor. “They zyood jhwust thtay whoa mm therr hmm, *nom nom*.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full!”

“*Nom nom... gulp*. They should just stay low in their homes far away... Why must they be so irritating, showing up around humans?!”

“Well... You could say that’s why we have a job.”

“But there should be a limit to that!”

“You think it’s true that a demon revived?” Miriam asked, licking yogurt sauce off her lips.

“A demon...” Anessa propped her head up. “Sounds like cock-and-bull, but the fiends are acting up. Can’t deny that...”

“Demons... Weren’t there loads of them?”

“Yeah, there were seventy-two of Solomon’s demons—if the rumors are to be believed.”

According to legend, there was once a great sorcerer named Solomon. He was versed in all forms of magic and alchemy, giving birth to many techniques and magical devices. However, with all his power, Solomon gradually began to thirst for authority as well. To this end, he produced undying artificial lifeforms known as homunculi. With them under his control, he soon stood at the summit of the continent—that is, until his madness caught up to him in his later years, and he disappeared to the furthest reaches of time and space. The homunculi ran amok once they lost their master and came to be known as demons. These demons worked their destruction wherever they could—they killed humans like livestock, burned towns, and crushed villages underfoot. There were even countries that fell to them.

As a result, most of the valuable data on Solomon’s techniques and the great

things he made were lost. Ultimately, Solomon's legacy was destroyed by his own hand. The demons were sealed by a hero with the grace of the Goddess Vienna, and now they slept all over the continent. The mana these demons exuded would give rise to fiends; at least, so tradition held.

"Well, it's a legend after all. You can't know how much of it is to be believed."

"But there are places where the mana is stronger..."

"Right. And there are shrines here and there to appease demon souls."

There were said to be seventy-two demons in total. The land was dotted with shrines to them, but this was only to offer them repose; they were not supposed to be seen as objects of worship. However, their conversation soon turned to the heretical cult that revered the demons and Solomon; lately, the cult had grown more active as well.

"When it rains, it pours..."

"Those people are out to revive the demons, right?"

"So I've heard. Troublingly enough," Anessa grumbled.

To this, Angeline readily nodded. "If a demon revives, we'll have more work...and I won't be able to take a vacation..."

"I don't think that's the issue here..."

"Heh heh, I'm sure Ange could take out a demon or two."

"There is no reason I shouldn't be able to win. I am the daughter of the Red Ogre, after all."

Angeline and Miriam began to grow heated on the matter. To her surprise, Anessa could easily picture exactly that scenario playing out if a demon did revive, and she felt a chill run down her spine.

Then, a winded guild employee burst into the tavern.

"Ah, thank Vienna I found you here!"

Angeline furrowed her brow. "What?" she asked.

"Yes, well, a land dragon appeared around the plains of Orcus... I apologize for bothering you on your time off, but could you go take care of it?"

The three girls exchanged glances and wry smiles. They hadn't the time to chat about nonsensical demons.

Chapter 7: Turnera Was Busily Preparing for Winter

Turnera was busily preparing for winter. It was almost time to harvest the chestnuts, walnuts, persimmons, apples, and pears planted around town, and this fresh yield would be nibbled on in moderation. Most would be dried or stewed into preserves, and apples would be made into hard cider. It was also time to reap the wheat planted in the spring. The cowberries and grapes plucked under Belgrieve's supervision were dried and stored.

A handful of the elderly sheep and goats were culled and processed into salted and dried meats. Fish from the river were similarly dried and smoked. Potatoes were dug up and stored. Beans were harvested and dried. The fields were tilled for the wheat seeds that would be sown in the fall. Firewood was gathered and distributed to each house. The grass was dried into hay for the sheep to pass the winter.

When most of the heavy lifting was out of the way, the village would hold an autumn festival in front of the church. Here, they would offer their joy, gratitude, and wishes to survive the winter in peace to Almighty Vienna above. It was also believed that winter was when ancestral spirits would return home, and they needed a warm welcome.

"Ah! A little lower, you'll hit the doorway! No, not like that! Angle it like that, and you'll hit the sides next! Argh! Be careful!" Maurice, the priest, shrieked.

The statue of Vienna was carried from the altar to the town square. The stone goddess statue was large and heavy, and it took several men to move it. But the church doors were narrow, and it was an annual trial to get it out without hitting anything. It was difficult to damage the stone statue, but the wooden door frame would occasionally bend and break.

The church had just been renovated, and Maurice was even more high-strung than usual. He would raise a hysteric shrieking each time the statue was lifted or lowered, and the villagers who watched would break into laughter. Belgrieve was there as well, watching with a smile. Only a few years prior—when he was

in his thirties—he would help carry the statue, but that was now a job for the younger generation.

Belgrieve was seen as one of the old pillars of the community. Regardless of the arduous work he went out and did of his own volition, no one would ask him to do physical labor anymore. The hot-blooded youths needed somewhere to show their strength, and if the older generation didn't step back, the youngsters would never be able to inherit their roles. Ultimately, the village system would struggle.

Even so, Belgrieve still found himself often working around the youngsters.

Despite hitting the doorway numerous times, the statue was finally squeezed out. Its milky-white finish reflected the autumn sun—Maurice faithfully polished it every day.

“It’s that time of year again, Kerry.”

“Yeah, comes quicker each year! We’re well stocked up this time. A huge load off my mind—we can enjoy winter instead of fearing and worrying about it, ha ha ha!” Kerry’s amply protruding gut shook as he laughed.

Winter was a dangerous time for northerners. Through half of the season, a thick coating of clouds would cover the skies. The winds were cold, and if snow fell, it would be hard to simply venture outside. However, it could be a fun season with sufficient preparation.

It was a time to spend at ease with family members who would otherwise be too busy with work, and on clear days, the stars were more beautiful than during the summer. When the snow fell, the children would frolic, albeit dressed far too lightly. But in order for any of this to be possible, the fall would have to be devoted to the winter. Not only the fall—it was no exaggeration to say the entire year was spent preparing for the winter season.

A large bearlike man came over. He had deep creases on his face, and his hair was dusted with a fair amount of white. Watching the events in the square, the man burst into a grand laugh. “Is everything going smoothly?” he asked.

“Oh, Chief. Anything I can help with?”

Belgrieve’s suggestion caused Hoffman, the village chief, to laugh even

harder.

“Gah ha ha ha! Settle down, Bell! You’re at the age to kick back and watch the young’uns do their thing! How are they supposed to grow up if you take their work?”

“I get where you’re coming from, but...I’ve got nothing better to do.”

“Quit rushing at your age! If you’ve got free time, how about you enjoy it!” Hoffman laughed and patted him on the back.

Belgrieve tousled his beard with a wry smile. It certainly was childish to get restless just because he had nothing to do.

Hoffman was the son of the previous chief, who had passed two years prior, and was eight years older than Belgrieve. He was nearly fifty, yet didn’t show it; with his blessed body and frank, open nature, he was well-loved by the villagers. When Belgrieve had first returned, the only ones who treated him normally and without scorn were Kerry and Hoffman, so Belgrieve was thankful to him too.

“Oi, Kerry. A caravan’s here. Where should I send them?”

“They’re early this year. The square’s still a mess—could you tell them to wait so we can clear some space for them?”

Merchants, peddlers, and traveling gypsies would gather on the day of Turnera’s fall festival. They liked the festive air, for one, and Turnera was reputed to have excellent produce, so they would bring various goods to barter for preserved foods. The villagers all looked forward to when the peddlers told of their travels and the gypsies danced and sang of legends.

Hoffman headed off to the village entrance while Kerry began directing the youths in the square to make space for a stall.

The statue of Vienna made it out safely, one way or another, and it was placed on a sturdy platform where the children decorated it with flowers and offerings of fruit and mutton were made. The festival preparations were gradually wrapping up.

With nothing to do, Belgrieve decided to patrol the village—though that was

really just an excuse to stretch his legs. Just because there was a festival going on, that wasn't to say there would be no fiends or wild beasts on the prowl. However, after defeating the icehund, the area had been peaceful as could be. Thus, his patrol for fiends required no more than the usual vigilance.

Nevertheless, he remained watchful as he completed his rounds. When he returned to the square, the caravan of merchants was already there unloading their wagons and assembling their stalls. The hasty ones were already touting their wares to the villagers. The gypsies and minstrels strummed their instruments to kill time, while the children stared at the rare, foreign trappings with starry eyes.

They were still in the preparatory stage, but the village was already filled with a festive mood. *No matter how old I get, I can't help but love this sort of thing*, Belgrieve thought to himself with a smile.

He chatted with the nearest merchants, offering them cowberries and grapes. The peddlers traveled widely, and their ears were sensitive to the exploits of adventurers—perhaps one of them would know something about Angeline.

“Oh yes, the Black-Haired Valkyrie!” an elderly peddler said with a huff of his tobacco pipe. “She’s like a guardian deity in the Orphen region. Thanks to her, I feel a sense of relief whenever I’m in the area.”

“It’s pretty rare to see a party of three girls. I hear they’re not just renowned in Orphen—they’re strong enough to compete for the top spot in the dukedom.”

“Not just the dukedom either. I’ve heard rumors about them as far off as the imperial capital.”

Turnera, Orphen, and Bordeaux were all but small parts of the Dukedom of Estogal. The dukedom’s territory was vast and thus divided into several territories, each governed by a territorial lord like Count Bordeaux. Its main territory was Estogal, which was further south than Orphen. The Dukedom of Estogal, too, was but a portion of the Rhodesian Empire that occupied the northwestern regions of the continent.

Belgrieve was satisfied, hearing of his daughter’s good reputation. Adventurers were often the wandering, rough-natured sort. They spent each

day brushing with death and tended to prioritize their own self-interests. Little things would add up, and there was no scarcity of adventurers who were seen as little more than hoodlums. Perhaps that would not be an issue at S-Rank, but he couldn't help but be worried for his daughter's reputation.

He never brought up the fact she was his daughter, though. The mayhem Sasha raised still lingered in his mind, and he didn't want these peddlers to see him in a different light. He rested his eyes on the square and was nursing his wine when a blue-haired lady peddler came up to him in a hurry.

"Um, hello," she said.

"Hmm? Ah, hello there. Do you need something?"

"I apologize for eavesdropping, but are you perhaps the Red Ogre Belgrieve?"

Belgrieve's mouth opened blankly. *This Red Ogre stuff again...*

"Yes, well, I am Belgrieve..."

The peddler's face lit up. "I knew it! You were talking about Miss Angeline, and with that splendid red hair, I just knew it! Truth be told, I was about to be attacked by bandits, and your daughter fought them off!"

Oh really? I didn't expect her name to pop up like that, Belgrieve thought. He was about to ask for details when the area around the village entrance suddenly grew rowdy. He could hear the rattling of metal armor, and that sound was headed straight for the square.

He looked to see men in matching sets of light armor approaching while guarding a two-horse carriage. Those gathered in the square exchanged confused looks.

"Oi, that's the Bordeaux family crest, ain't it?"

"What's the lord want out here?"

Belgrieve felt something terrible was brewing as he watched the carriage come to a stop. From inside emerged a woman who couldn't have been much older than twenty. She wore a light, mint-green dress with no ornamentation, likely meant for travel. Her platinum-blond hair had been braided and bound behind her head, and her features were refined. She gave off a bit of an

unyielding impression, but her eyes were gentle and calm. He got the feeling he had seen her somewhere before.

“If she’s from House Bordeaux...” Belgrieve’s bad premonition grew into a throbbing headache as the woman restlessly looked around.

Her bearing seemed a bit awkward and bashful as she proclaimed in a clear voice, “I’m so sorry for startling you. I’m searching for someone.”

Stares were exchanged among the assemblage as though they were asking, *Who could it be?* Hoffman hurried forward and bowed his head.

“I am Hoffman, the chief of this village... I take it you have come from House Bordeaux.”

“Oh, pardon my late introduction. My name is Helvetica Bordeaux. My father passed recently, so I currently hold the position of Countess Bordeaux.”

Hoffman quickly fell to his knees. “I did not know you were the new lord...”

Helvetica frantically urged him back to his feet. “Oh no, no need to be so formal. I’m not fond of showing off my authority,” she said with a soft, friendly smile. However, as friendly as she was, her demeanor was refined and she had an air about her that made it clear not just anyone would be allowed to approach her so easily. *I see, she does have the makings of a lord*, Belgrieve thought.

Hoffman looked at her meekly, then nervously opened his mouth. “It is an honor for the Countess to visit our humble little village... We are not harboring any criminals.”

The woman looked dazed for a moment, though that quickly turned into a giggle.

“Oh no, there’s no need to worry about that. I did not come here to pursue a criminal. I am here to meet the Red Ogre Belgrieve.”

“Huh? Bell?” The villagers’ eyes gathered on Belgrieve.

Red Ogre again, he thought, awkwardly trying to make himself seem smaller. The blue-haired peddler was making quite an amazed face.

With their stares as a guide, Helvetica gallantly made her way to Belgrieve,

taking his hand with sparkling eyes.

“You must be Belgrieve.”

He paused. “I am.”

“Your daughter saved my youngest sister. You have my gratitude.”

“Yes, well, thanks for that...” Belgrieve resigned himself, giving a troubled laugh. He didn’t know if it was because of his nervousness, but he could feel his phantom pain coming back to him.

Helvetica simply smiled.

The three Bordeaux sisters were famous in these parts. Seren, the youngest, had already begun to show talent in domestic affairs at the age of fifteen. The valorous second daughter Sasha excelled in martial arts, and there was no doubt she would reach S-Rank one day.

Then, there was Helvetica. Accomplished in both the pen and the sword, she was a charismatic woman who, rumor had it, would one day be handed the territory rather than having to marry and transfer the power to her husband. This prediction had, apparently, come true, as she reigned as the current countess.

That very same Helvetica was now holding his hand, simply beaming, and there was little he could do save for smile bitterly at this. However, behind Helvetica’s friendly smile, he felt a sharpness, like a beast eyeing its prey. She hadn’t come just to offer her thanks.

Looking Belgrieve over from head to toe, she laughed. “You’re very well trained. I have heard of your masterful swordsmanship.”

“No... You speak too highly of me...”

He felt as if he was being overpowered by a woman shorter than he was. It was somewhat impressive, and he had to wonder if those of great talent could utterly consume someone simply by standing face-to-face with them.

Helvetica’s eyes narrowed. “I came today with a request.”

“I see.”

“Let me get straight to the point. Belgrieve, please serve under House Bordeaux.”

So it's come to this. Belgrieve felt exhausted. Presumably, Sasha had spread word of her defeat with all sorts of exaggeration. He never thought the lord would come to him personally, though. In any case, Belgrieve had no interest in accepting—it was too far beyond him. He shook his head.

“My apologies, but I have no intention of leaving Turnera. I am already forty-two, and my body grows weaker by the day. I don't think I can prove useful to you now.”

“What are you saying? Despite how she looks, Sasha's sword is unrivaled in the Bordeaux region. Of course, I would like to possess the strength that effortlessly subdued hers.”

It wasn't exactly effortless, but that wasn't the issue.

“Perhaps because I was once an adventurer, I can't stand the thought of serving under anyone. I am truly honored that you took the time out of your day to see me, but I must decline.”

“Please?”

“No...?”

“You can set your own terms.”

“Even if you say that...”

“I'm begging you, become mine.”

“I apologize...”

At the end of this back and forth, Helvetica sullenly frowned. “I see you're as stubborn as you are strong.”

“I was born like this, I'm sorry to admit.”

Helvetica grinned. It seemed she had finally given up, and Belgrieve breathed a sigh of relief.

“Then I will have to bring you back by force.”

“Huh?” Belgrieve uttered after a beat.

“Boys! If you will!”

At Helvetica’s orders, the group of lightly armored men surrounded Belgrieve. They were her bodyguards, evidently. It seemed they only intended to capture him, so they did not draw their weapons.

Those watching the scene kept their distance, startled.

Belgrieve spaced out for a moment, but the closer the guards inched towards him, the more he felt a strange sense of amusement until finally, he burst into laughter. The guards were taken aback, naturally, as were those watching, and even Lady Helvetica herself.

She’s a child. No matter how lionized this new lord was, she was still a twenty-year-old girl. In that case, he just had to be the adult, and he did love playing along with the children’s games.

He slickly dodged a guard who jumped at him—the guard grumbled as he collided with his comrades.

Belgrieve quickly recovered his footing and took his stance. “Tag at my age,” he mused. He dodged, parried, and tossed around the guards who came after him one after the next, his movements so unimaginably smooth for someone with a prosthetic leg. None of them were trying to kill, making them easy to deal with.

By the time an hour had passed, the guards all lay immobile, utterly exhausted. Helvetica stood there looking awestruck with her mouth half-open, as though she couldn’t believe what she had just witnessed.

Belgrieve looked at her, calming his slightly erratic breath. “In any case, I will be declining your offer.”

“It seems this was my complete loss...” She shook her head.

It appeared as though she would give up this time. Belgrieve felt the strength draining out of him, only to feel something soft against his arm the next instant. He looked in surprise to see Helvetica clinging to him.

“You’ve left me with no other option... If you won’t be mine, I just have to be yours!”

“Huh?”

“I hope you’ll accept me, inexperienced as I am...”

Helvetica’s cheeks were red. She had strength in her grip, and the feeling of her voluminous chest through her dress was terribly soft. Belgrieve’s mind had halted at this completely unexpected development. His eyes darted around as the crowd exploded.

“Eh? Eh? Is Mr. Bell marrying into the Bordeaux House?”

“You sly dog! Marrying into money, eh?”

“Wrong, the lord’s marrying into Bell’s house!”

“Oi, this festival’s turning into a wedding!”

“Color me surprised!”

“Let’s get the ale flowing!”

“Where’s Maurice? We need a priest!”

Soon after, the sound of hooves heralded the intrusion of several more riders. The spectators scattered to make way. One of the riders, a girl with glasses, dashing jumped down right in front of Belgrieve. It was none other than Seren Bordeaux, third daughter of House Bordeaux.

“Sister! What are you doing out here?!”



Seren closed in on Helvetica, rage in her eyes. Helvetica blinked and gave a troubled smile.

“Well, you see, Seren...I’ve come to recruit Belgrieve.”

“You were going to drag him back by force, weren’t you?!”

She had hit the nail on the head. Helvetica awkwardly laughed, hugging Belgrieve tighter to play it off. Upon seeing that, Seren pouted angrily, grabbed Helvetica by the nape, and tore her away from Belgrieve.

“Lock her in the carriage!”

“Yes ma’am!”

Seren’s guards promptly shoved Helvetica into her own carriage. It was hard to tell who was actually the elder sister here. She turned back to Belgrieve and lowered her head. “I’m sorry for all the trouble... You’re Belgrieve, aren’t you?”

“I am.” Finally returning to his senses, Belgrieve noticed her bowed head and hurriedly returned the gesture.

“I am Seren Bordeaux. Your daughter Angeline saved my life and allowed me to see my father before he passed away. Words are not enough to express my gratitude. And yet...my sister has been so rude to you,” she said apologetically with a knitted brow.

“Oh, I don’t really mind...”

“Much obliged... She’s usually a respectable person, but she has a bit of an obsession with capable people. Whenever she catches wind of a great talent who hasn’t been hired yet, she runs off without thinking...”

She’s like a child wanting a toy. Belgrieve smiled bitterly.

“And thanks to that, the territory is developing splendidly, but she’s forcefully dragged people back more than a handful of times,” Seren went on. “Helvetica! Are you reflecting on your actions?!”

“I’m reflecting, Seren! Let me out!”

“Not on my life! This time, I won’t forgive you until I’ve returned you to the house! By Vienna, my savior’s father... Good grief!”

After briskly throwing out orders, Seren was soon to be on her way. Belgrieve hesitated for a moment before conferring with Hoffman. Then he called out to Seren, who had mounted her horse.

“If you return now, you’ll have to camp along the way.”

“Yes, but there isn’t much we can do about that. We are the ones who barged in.”

“There will be an autumn festival tonight. Would you like to join us?”

Seren touched her glasses in surprise. “Really? But...”

“We’d gain a bit of prestige if the countess takes part. Right, Chief?”

With the conversation turned to him, Hoffman replied shrilly, “That’s right, that’s right! You might find it a bit shoddy, but go right ahead and join us!”

“You’re the shoddiest one here, Chief,” someone called from the peanut gallery, eliciting laughter.

“Shut up!” Hoffman yelled back. “Agh! My apologies...” He shrunk back and hid behind Belgrieve. Seren giggled and slid down from her horse.

“Then perhaps I’ll take you up on that offer?”

“I have one condition. Please let Helvetica out of the carriage.”

Seren’s eyes widened, but she soon shook her head, shrugged, and gestured to the carriage. The door opened, and Helvetica raced out, ecstatic at her grand escape.

“Belgrieve, oh sir Belgrieve! Thank you for saving me!”

“Ha ha, you’re making such a big deal out of it...”

“How benevolent... House Bordeaux could use someone of your—”

“Sister!”

“I’m...I’m only joking...”

“Good grief... Next time, I really will lock you in the carriage!”

Seren led her horse away, her cheeks puffed up in a huff.

Helvetica whispered in Belgrieve’s ear, “She’s usually a very kind girl, you

know.”

Belgrieve laughed. Under a full starry sky, the lovely sisters of House Bordeaux joined the festivities, and there could be no way that the autumn festival wouldn't grow rowdy after that.

Winter was quickly approaching.

Chapter 8: To the West of Orphen Was a Wasteland

To the west of Orphen was a wasteland littered with rocks of all sizes. In this place, a complex geometric pattern appeared and lingered in the air for a brief second, before a powerful torrent of lightning gushed forth from it. The spider fiends that had been racing around the area were scorched black.

“There’s more where thaaat came from!” Each time Miriam lightly swung her staff, more patterns would appear in the air and lightning would fall again and again.

Angeline and Anessa watched from behind.

“Magic sure is useful for wiping out hordes...”

“It is... But do you reckon Merry’s stressed, or something?”

The force behind Miriam’s magic was far from normal. She seemed enraged.

Angeline smiled. “I’m sure...the cake she wanted was sold out.”

“Sad to say I can’t deny the possibility.”

Anessa dexterously nocked three arrows, drew her bow, and fired. Those arrows accurately pierced the brows of three spiders the lightning had spared before bursting into flames. Apparently, her projectiles were engraved with spells to make them explode.

The blast wave caught the brim of Miriam’s large witch’s hat, causing it to fly into the air.

“Whoa,” Angeline exclaimed as she rushed in and caught it.

In no time, the spiders crowding the wasteland had been completely annihilated. The girls seemed completely unperturbed, despite the fact that the spiders had been AA-Rank Calamity-Class fiends.

Angeline stretched. “Anne, hurry and become S-Rank, so I can have some free time...”

“What’s with that...” Anessa sighed.

Miriam, meanwhile, ran up to them in a flurry of motion. “Aaah, my hat.”

Atop her uncovered head rested two twitching cat ears. It was hard to tell since she always hid those ears under her hat, but Miriam was a beast-man; her loose robe concealed a tail as well.

As she hobbled her way over, Angeline handed her the hat.

“Here.”

“Thanks Ange.” Miriam took it and pulled it down until it nearly covered her eyes. Her body trembled. “Woow, it’s coold. It’s totally winter now.”

“Right. Let’s hurry back for some mulled wine.”

The three packed up and returned to Orphen. Along the way, the thick clouds that had loomed since the morning grew even darker until it finally began to snow. The wind was frigid, as if pricking their skin. Exposed ears and noses turned red in the breeze, and their breaths formed into a white haze before melting into the pearly-gray winter sky.

Orphen was in the northern part of the continent, and its winters were cold. However, Turnera was even further north, and Angeline thought nothing of it. When she was younger, she would often romp around the snow while lightly dressed, giving Belgrieve quite a headache.

Breathing out a long, wintry breath, Anessa muttered, “Winter, huh... I wouldn’t want my hands to get numb.”

“An archer’s fingertips are their lifeline. How about getting gloves?”

“Nah, I’m used to shooting barehanded. Maybe fingerless gloves.”

“How about instead...we use Anne’s inability to work in the winter as a reason to take off. Then I’ll be in Turnera. Perfect.”

“There you go again... In the first place, the snow’s too harsh in these parts to even head north.”

“Urgh...” Angeline grumbled.

“I for one want a day off. I want a vacation,” Miriam chimed in.

They had received minor breaks since the start of fall, though Angeline couldn't recall ever having more than three in a row. They hunted and hunted, yet the fiends showed no signs of calming down—in fact, they seemed more active now than ever. Lately, their party was being called in to deal with A-Rank fiends as well. There were just so many of them that the adventurers were growing fed up and leaving Orphen bit by bit.

“The guild is facing a serious shortage...” Angeline muttered.

Anessa nodded in agreement. “Yeah, I think so too. I don't care if they're only B-Rank, we need more adventurers on board.”

“There are loads of adventurers leaving Orphen... Even the high-ranking ones are starting to go. This isn't good.”

“I mean, they've got no time to catch their breath with so many fiends popping up. Rumors of the working conditions here are getting out too.”

“Right? People are usually happy with how much Calamity-Class quests pay, but now they're just tired.”

“Precisely. Not to mention adventurers are folks who don't like to be tied down.”

“We need to think of something...”

In any case, the three returned to the guild and reported the completion of their request. The receptionist smiled but looked somewhat exhausted as she stamped the seal of approval.

Angeline scowled. “Are you tired...?”

“Me? No, ha ha ha... At least, not as much as you adventurers.”

“Hmmm...”

Miriam stretched out. “All right, let's go to the tavern. I want some sweet mulled wine.”

“Go on ahead of me.”

“What's wrong? Something up?”

“Just some minor business. I'll meet up with you later.”

“Okay...? Well, whatever.”

Anessa and Miriam tilted their heads questioningly, but left regardless. Angeline turned back to the receptionist.

“Hey, is the guild master in...?”

Hearing how angry Angeline sounded, the receptionist flinched and began to panic. “U-Um, er... Why do you ask? Is something wrong?”

“You honestly think nothing’s wrong here...?! I’m here to talk about serious business—more serious than usual. No pretending he’s not in—call him here.”

The receptionist hesitated, but eventually gave up and headed through the back door. A while later, a middle-aged man with scraggly brown hair that was peppered with flecks of white emerged—the guild master of Orphen, Lionel.

Looking worn out, Lionel yawned and slowly scratched his head. Perhaps he hadn’t had the time to fix his bedhead, as his hair was a complete mess, sprouting this way and that. His eyes squinted gloomily, and he gave off the impression that he had been sleeping until a moment ago.

Angeline sullenly huffed, “You came out today, Guild Master. Instead of running away...”

“What do you want? You’ll need to wait a bit longer for a vacation, Ms. Ange.”

“I’m not here for that today... There are too few adventurers. In the first place, it’s strange that the higher-ranking adventurers should have any obligation to the guild. Adventurers aren’t supposed to be tied down. They should be free to decide what jobs they take... That’s why adventurers are fleeing from Orphen.”

Lionel scratched his cheek. “Well, you know how it is with the unnatural outbreaks of Calamity-Class fiends and all. If it was left up to free will, we’d have dead civilians on our hands, along with all the destroyed towns and cities...”

“Then hurry up and look into what’s causing this mass outbreak. It’s unfair that we’re the ones who have to deal with it...”

“I am sorry about that—and quite grateful too. But when you were promoted

to A-Rank, I explained that high-ranking adventurers were obligated to help deal with Calamity-Class fiends, didn't I?"

"And who's the one who laughed and said, 'But that rarely ever happens'?!"

"Regulations were pretty lax because there were never so many Calamity-Class fiends back then. Can you really blame me now?" he griped. "Anyways, honor your promises. Those with power have certain obligations."

"If you're not doing anything to fix this...I at least have the right to complain about it!" Angeline said, tapping her fingertips against the counter.

Lionel was starting to sound frustrated. "That's why I've increased your job rewards, and I'm paying you a fixed salary too. We didn't used to do that, you know? Back when I was in your shoes—"

Angeline cut him off. "It's not about the money! I did not become an adventurer to spend every waking hour killing fiends! Don't think you can take advantage of us forever... The adventurers are all leaving! If you don't find the cause soon, it will only get worse!"

"Ugh... Yes, I think so too, but investigating that is also an adventurer's job. The fiends are popping up faster than we can handle, and we have no one we can send to do it. We can't just ignore human lives to send people to uncover the cause, and the same goes for the other guilds. They're sending all their work to us, since we have the most adventurers, troublingly enough. And thanks to that, this old man is all worn out."

Angeline furrowed her brow. "Don't play dumb, Guild Master... You're just neglecting it because you can't be bothered! If you don't have the people, then you could scout out some mercenaries, or drag in some retired adventurers, and if there are no adventurers around Orphen, then ask Estogal for reinforcements! Why, you could even put the duke's army to work too! This is no longer just a problem for adventurers!"

Lionel offered an awkward frown. "I mean...if you load on any more, this old man will work himself to death. I'm already thirty-nine."

"What are you saying, after all the work you've put me up to... You're not risking your life on the frontlines anymore, so put some backbone into it! This is

why the adventurers are going away!”

Angeline smacked a fist against the counter. The receptionist shrieked and stepped back as the cracks grew even deeper.

“I get it, I get it.” Lionel gave in. “There’s a lot of paperwork to do, so I can’t get to it just yet, but I’ll try.”

“That’s a promise, Guild Master... If you don’t hurry up, there really will be more deaths.”

“Now, now, if it really gets to that, I’ll just get a bit serious. You know, despite everything, I used to be S-Rank.”

Angeline sneered at Lionel’s attempts to pacify her. “You’re acting quite smug for someone who lost to me in one blow...”

“Hey! You promised not to say that! It’s a lie! It’s all a lie! The guild master is still the strongest around!” Falling into witless dismay, Lionel began loudly making excuses to no one in particular. The receptionist stared at him.

Once upon a time, Lionel had been amused by the tremendous pace with which Angeline climbed through the ranks, and challenged her to a mock battle. A part of him wanted to humble a little girl who was growing a bit big for her britches, but it all resulted in him keeling over from one well-placed blow to the head.

He begged Angeline to keep it a secret, hoping to protect his dignity as guild master. However, Lionel never had any dignity to begin with. No one would say so aloud, but the sentiment was shared by everyone from the receptionists to the adventurers. Lionel’s amiability was both his strongest point and his greatest flaw; in a situation like this, his frivolous attitude only invited irritation.

Nevertheless, Angeline had his word now, and she left the guild with her shoulders raised indignantly.

The snow was gradually falling more heavily from thick, dark clouds. It wasn’t quite noon, and yet, the streetlamps were already being lit.

The tavern had no magical heating, and yet it was crammed so full of people Ange nearly choked from the hot temperature of drunkards vehemently

debating while a red flame burned in the hearth. In fact, the icy winds blowing in through the gaps seemed refreshing to her.

She restlessly searched for Anessa and Miriam, finding the two of them at the bar. She took a seat, propping her head up with a hand, and called to the owner across the counter.

“One mulled wine—load it up with spices. Also, a duck sauté.”

While the owner was busy with other customers, he glanced at Angeline and nodded. He already knew her face—though he was so dreadfully unsociable that she still didn’t know his name.

Miriam’s cheeks were already red as she savored her wine and asked, “What did you get up to?”

“I made sure that someone will look into the cause of these fiend outbreaks.”

Anessa passed her some cheese.

“You think that’ll work out? The high-ranking adventurers are all out on other jobs—either that, or they’ve run off to other guilds. Who’s gonna look into it?”

“They could pull in some of their retired ones...like Old Man Silver, or the Muscle General.”

“Stop calling Mr. Cheborg the Muscle General... They’re both getting pretty old though. Maybe they won’t be up for it?”

“Do you really think so, Anne...?”

“No... Honestly, I can’t imagine old age doing anything to slow them down,” Anne answered after a moment.

“Right? I can’t understand why they retired in the first place...”

Angeline gingerly sipped at the mulled wine placed before her. It had been filled with honey and spices, giving off a strong, sweet aroma that made it feel like a fire had been lit in the depths of her body. Once she’d reached drinking age, she would always have it in the winter. Meanwhile, the duck was juicier than usual—a real delicacy.

Gradually, she could hear the outside wind growing stronger, rattling the

sealed windows with the sound of lashing whips. Each time someone came or went, that wind would blow some snow through the doorway. It was sure to be a cold night.

When she lived in Turnera, Angeline would spend nights like these clinging to Belgrieve as she slept. Belgrieve's arms were large and warm, and they let her sleep with peace of mind. After she'd decided to leave for Orphen, she'd done her best to learn to sleep alone, but on the coldest nights, or when she felt the most helpless, she would sneak into his bed anyways. Angeline's hands were cold by nature, so he would always be startled, but he would smile and let her sleep with him.

Angeline let out a deep sigh. "Dad was warm..."

"What was that?"

"I said my dad is incredibly warm if you hold him. He's perfect for cold days like this."

"You really are a spoiled girl, Ange. Aha ha." Miriam cackled.

Angeline pursed her lips. "There is nothing wrong with a daughter being doted on by her father... What about you two?"

"Huh? We're orphans, remember? We were supposed to sleep separately, but it's not like winter's advent was suddenly gonna increase the number of blankets, so a number of us would pack into the same bed and layer up our covers to sleep."

"Right, right. Anne, see—she's no good with cold, so she would cling to me."

"Wha—! Don't be daft! You're the one who clung to me! Pressing those cold hands against me!"

"Mmm-ha ha ha, turnabout is fair play."

Angeline finally realized Miriam had already downed a number of cups of hot wine, putting her in quite the mood. Her pink cheeks turned redder, her eyes were unfocused, and she kept fawning over Angeline and Anessa.

"Meowwn, I feel great."

"Ah, you drank too much, dummy. You're not exactly a heavyweight."

“Cold weather. Good drinks. What else is there to say?”

“I’m dragging you back before it’s too late... How about you, Ange?”

“I’ll drink some more. To vent my frustration...”

“Aaah, aye’ll hyave shum moar too...”

“You’re done! See you tomorrow Ange—don’t overdo it with the drinks.”

Miriam flailed as Anessa dragged her out of the shop. The two of them apparently shared a small house. *Would they sleep in the same bed on a cold night like this?* Angeline imagined the scene as she stuffed the last morsel of duck into her mouth.

Now alone, Angeline ordered another mulled wine, a grilled sausage, and some pickled radish. She glanced around the tavern. There were several adventurer-looking folks, but perhaps everyone was exhausted, as even their merrymaking seemed a bit weary.

If the guild managed to scout some mercenaries or skilled wanderers, or if the retired high-ranking ones returned, the number of adventurers could bounce back. Or, if the lord’s army went on the move, the adventurers would have enough leeway to look into the cause. Finding that out would make it easier to deal with, and the burden placed on Angeline and everyone else would be substantially reduced. Even former adventurers who couldn’t take jobs due to old age or injury could at least guide the lower-ranking ones. If the quality of the adventurers rose, it would ultimately make it easier for Angeline to take some time off.

“But will it work out so easily...?”

Come to think of it, her father had been an excellent teacher. *He never said very much, but he was always watching me and gave advice when it was needed. If my dad could become an instructor...* Once she’d thought up to that point, a flash of lightning suddenly raced across her brain.

“Why didn’t I realize it sooner...” she said slowly.

Instead of going home herself, she could simply have Belgrieve come to the capital. It would be more than possible to support him with her income.

She tried to imagine the two of them renting out a large house. Every time she completed a request and came home, her father would be there to pat her on the head. She could eat the meals he cooked for her. Naturally, it would be far easier to introduce her friends to him. Not to mention, her father was strong—his rank would rise in no time if he was reinstated as an adventurer. Then, fighting side-by-side in the same party would no longer be a dream, and everyone would respect the Red Ogre.

Unfortunately, it was currently winter, and Turnera was sealed away in the snow. It was difficult enough just leaving the capital, and it wouldn't be easy to send letters either.

“Dammit, I’m such a fool...”

Angeline took a mouthful of wine and sighed. “Still...” She had a vague feeling that Belgrieve and Turnera came as a set. Of course, she wanted to call him to the capital and treat him to the tavern and the cake shop. She wanted to introduce him to Anessa and Miriam, and all the other adventurers she got along with.

But even more than that, she wanted to harvest cowberries in the mountains, wash dishes, and till the fields—especially if Belgrieve was there to watch over her.

Her desire for her father to be more renowned and her urge to monopolize him were at odds. Both wishes were nearly equal, but when she recalled the fireplace back home in Turnera, her thoughts were swayed in that direction. She imagined herself there, sitting on Belgrieve’s lap.

“I need to go home after all...”

She pressed her chin against the counter. It was nice and cool, a pleasant sensation against her wine-heated face. *I just want dad to be my dad.* She sighed.

Someone sat in the seat beside her. It was so cold and snowy, yet the customers continued to pour in; no doubt everyone was seeking some warmth.

“Hmm...”

The owner set out a sausage, some pickled radish, and mulled wine in front of

her. As always, he did so unceremoniously. Angeline gave a slight nod and placed a few coins on the table.

She had just bit down on the sausage, which was practically bursting with meaty juices, when she heard an “Oh?” from beside her. She turned to see the blue-haired lady peddler sitting there. Angeline’s eyes widened in recognition. *Didn’t expect to see her again...*

“Oh... Aren’t you that...?”

“The pleasure’s all mine, Ms. Angeline. You really saved me back there.”

Angeline hadn’t seen the peddler since she’d rescued Seren from the bandits. It had been close to half a year since then, but they had been alone together on the road for several days, and the impact of saving Seren and returning her to House Bordeaux ensured that Angeline remembered this woman. The peddler hadn’t forgotten about the Black-Haired Valkyrie either.

“I’m glad you look well...”

“Yes, thanks to you.”

“You’re doing business in Orphen now?” Angeline asked hesitantly.

“Aha ha, I just got here. I was carting fish from Elvgren to Bordeaux—it’s easier this time of year when you don’t need to pay for cooling magic.”

“Bordeaux... It’s even colder there...”

“That it is. It’s winter, plain and simple. I’m from Estogal myself, so I’m not that good with the cold.”

“But you still went north...”

“Tee hee, that’s the peddler spirit. House Bordeaux’s gotten a good impression of me ever since then, and it’s become much easier to do business in northern parts. I even went and bought a sled.” The peddler laughed as she sipped her steaming hot wine. House Bordeaux was apparently accommodating her as one of Seren’s saviors.

“Not bad,” she said after blowing on her beverage. Suddenly seeming to recall something, the peddler spoke up: “Come to think of it, I was in Turnera for the autumn festival. I saw your father.”

Angeline suddenly closed in on her, causing the peddler to let out a slight “Eek!”

“How was he? Was my father well?”

“Y-Yes, very. He seemed to be in utterly good health. He managed to handle all of House Bordeaux’s elite guard rather easily...”

“Huh... What? What do you mean...?”

The peddler explained the dispute between Helvetica and Belgrieve during the festival. The more she told, the more Angeline’s displeasure became manifest—her brow was knit, her mouth fell into a sharp frown, and her fingertips pounded against the table.

“Wench... So she thinks she can snatch away my father, huh? She better not expect me to let her off lightly just because she’s Seren’s sister!”

“N-Now, now, she ultimately called it off.”

“Good... Well, I’d expect no less from dad. He was pretty cool, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, I was honestly quite shocked. He had no wasted movement, and though there’s no mistaking that peg leg in hindsight, it took me a while to realize he had a prosthetic at all.”

“Right... I’m sure he’d be even more incredible if he had both legs.”

“His hair was a splendid red too—truly befitting the red ogre. And he had the composure of a mature adult man. I can understand why you’d want to reunite with him, Ms. Angeline,” the peddler stated airily. Though she was clearly paying lip service, Angeline’s eyes lit up, and she grabbed the peddler by the shoulder.

“You understand...”

“Eh? Me? Y-Yes?”

“There is no other option. We shall spend the night discussing my dad’s brilliance...!”

“W-Wait, Ms. Angeline?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll pay your bill.”

“I-I’m glad to hear it, but I have a business negotiation tomorrow.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll cover any losses you incur.”

“Trust is pretty important for a merchant...”

“Master, two mulled wines, and some cheese—on the double.”

Angeline stuck her hand into her wallet, and heedlessly slammed a fistful of coins on the bar. Her eyes were set in determination. The mulled wine was getting to her.

It’s no good, I can’t get away, the merchant thought with a sigh. But she smiled and steeled her resolve. Would her business partners understand if she told them she’d been apprehended by an S-Rank? She could only hope.

Chapter 9: It Was a Dream

It was a dream, and Belgrieve knew it. He was staring down from the musty ceiling of what seemed to be the inside of a dungeon. The stone floor stretched further and further into the darkness, sandwiched between uneven walls. He could not move his body, yet his vision was terribly clear despite the dimness.

Eventually, several people walked down the path. They were young—eighteen at best. They wore relatively new equipment, each holding up their weapon as they walked with hope and confidence in their step. This was the unwavering stride of youth.

At the lead was a boy whose hair was the color of hay. He had an intellectual look to him, and he would frequently strike up a conversation with the members following behind. He tried to speak in hushed tones, but it seemed like he was still trying to find the appropriate volume for these halls.

One spot behind him, a red-haired boy occasionally chimed in with a wry smile. He was followed by a girl with silver hair, and then a brown-haired boy, who both tagged along with a smile.

Don't do it, Belgrieve pleaded, but no words would escape his mouth. He could kick and scream all he wanted, and nothing would come of it. *Don't go past there!* His desperate scream did not reach them.

It wasn't long before something pounced from the darkness—it came down upon the boy at the lead. He tried to pull his sword, but he was a beat too late. And that was when the red-haired boy pushed the leader out of the way.

Belgrieve's long-gone right leg began to burn in seething pain.

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The snow came down in spades. It made for a magnificent frigid spectacle as it fell, the soft streams of white carrying off every sound it could. Consequently, it was terribly quiet, the silence broken only by the faint crackle of the fireplace and the hissing of the simmering kettle hung over it.

Despite all the snow, the sky was a milky hue—an irksome brightness that made the piled snow sting the eyes.

Belgrieve sat by the fireplace carding sheep wool. There wasn't much work he could do outside at this time of year; the most important tasks were to keep the snow from piling on the roof and to shovel the paths. From time to time, he would also help the lumberjacks in the forest, though that rarely ever happened when the snow was this thick.

Winter was, instead, the season for housework: beans were separated, wool was carded, and textiles would be made from the resultant yarn. If he took a walk, he would hear the clacking of looms coming from every house.

Most households in Turnera raised sheep. Kerry had an extraordinarily large flock, and a large spinning workshop to go along with it. Everyone else would spin their wool in their own homes, weaving and knitting it into clothing.

Belgrieve did not have any sheep of his own, but Kerry and the other villagers would always share a bit with him. He passed the loose wool through a series of bristles to get out any tangles. Once he spun it on a spindle, he would be left with yarn.

It had been four months since he had begun working indoors, and spring should have been right around the corner, but it had been nothing but snow for the past few days.

"Phew..." He stood once his carding reached a good stopping point, then immediately found himself shivering. While the fireplace smoldered red, the thick piles of snow filled his house with a piercing cold. He took another log and tossed it in, a spark bursting out as it hit the pile.

It was almost noon. Belgrieve picked up a wooden bowl he had placed near the hearth. The cloth draped over it was pulled back to reveal bloated bread dough. Yeast didn't rise properly in the cold, so it took a bit of time for the dough to proof.

Belgrieve lightly kneaded the dough, then tore off a few bits and rounded them into balls. He took out his skillet, oiled it, lined up the dough balls, and covered it all up with a wooden lid. Then, he placed the skillet over the live embers he had gathered at the edge of the fireplace. In a pot beside it boiled

some bean and dried-meat soup.

“It’s quiet...” Belgrieve murmured, stroking his beard.

This was the fifth winter since Angeline had left. When she was still in the house, she would cling tight to him whenever it got cold. Her hands and feet chilled easily, and even after she started practicing sleeping alone, she would sneak into Belgrieve’s bed on the coldest nights. He would often find himself startled awake by her frigid hands. And when the nights were too cold for either of them to sleep, they would sit by the crackling fireplace. Belgrieve would set Angeline on his lap and read her the same picture book.

He finished his light meal of bread and soup. Once he had tidied up the dishes, he carefully equipped a snowshoe to the tip of his wooden leg. He slipped on his gloves, draped on his coat, wrapped a muffler around his neck, pulled a hat over his ears, and walked out. He had shoveled the snow just that morning, yet his yard was already a uniform layer of white. Icicles of all shapes and sizes dangled from the eaves.

Crunching the snow underfoot, Belgrieve retrieved more firewood from the pile out back. Then, he lifted the large plank that had been buried in the snow. A cavity had been dug there to preserve potatoes and radishes under a layer of hay.

“Oh... They’re a bit frozen...”

The ones on top had been damaged by the cold. He carefully plucked them out, then took a few of the pristine ones. Retrieving some hay from the shed, he layered it in a little thicker before placing the plank over them just as before. He was running out of provisions.

“It took so much time, and I’ve hardly done anything at all...”

Once he was back inside, he poured himself a glass of hot water from the kettle and added a bit of liquor. The alcohol rose off of it, piercing the depths of his nostrils. Belgrieve took his time drinking it and allowing it to warm him to the core.

“All right... I should get going now.”

He hung his sword from his belt and stepped out with a long walking stick.

Even when the days were so cold, Belgrieve would make his daily rounds. Most wild animals were in hibernation, but perhaps the odd fiend would draw near under the cloak of the storm. He hadn't encountered any so far, but there had been an icehund in the summer, and the number of fiends was on the rise. He could never be too careful.

The breath he exhaled through his scarf was white—and it didn't disappear immediately, instead lingering a while in the air. If he hadn't put on snowshoes, his solid peg leg would have sunk straight into the snow.

"It's even colder than usual today. I'll have to keep shoveling..."

Unable to contain themselves indoors, the kids would always run out and play, but today, there were none. Belgrieve used the barely visible fences as his guide, taking care not to step in the fields as he walked around the village. The distant forests and mountains were but a haze; he could barely make out their shadows in the dazzling white.

Belgrieve recalled how he used to take the young Angeline around with him. Her cheeks would be red, her nose runny, but she would tag along without a single complaint. However, she would doff her coat the second she went to play with the other kids, throwing him into a bit of a panic.

Each night, the layer of frost over the wheat fields outside the village would grow thicker, and now they looked like flat plains. Perhaps there was freshly sprouted wheat underneath, barely enduring the cold. Small footsteps—perhaps a fox's—stretched out towards the forest.

He shook his shoulders to rid himself of the coating of soft snow that had built up before he realized it. He let out a long breath and watched it disappear into the sky.

And then, he saw figures in the distance. He narrowed his eyes.

They seemed to be children, and not just one or two of them. There were five or six, their hands linked in a ring as they danced in a circle. He heard a serene song in the wind, one that didn't seem to be of this world. Belgrieve reached for his sword and quietly approached.

The dancing figures were indeed children, around seven or eight years old.

They all wore puffy white clothes with matching white fur hats on their heads. While at first, it seemed like they were nimbly prancing about, on closer inspection, it became clear that their feet weren't touching the ground and they left no footsteps behind.

"Snow children..." He released his hilt.

Snow spirits came in all shapes and sizes. There were those that were hostile to humans, as well as ones that meant no harm and were essentially natural phenomena. The snow children were the latter. The boys and girls were as if nature had taken on physical form. They were indifferent to humans, feeling no particular goodwill or malice, and were best left alone.

He watched them dance for a while. While they seemed to be bundles of energy, their song too manifested the stillness of the snow, resounding as if to emphasize the silence. Once he knew they were harmless, there was not a more magical scene around.

It was then that a strong wind suddenly picked up, wrapping the snow into a vortex. Belgrieve found himself closing his eyes and covering his face.

"Gah..."

The wind ran rampant for a short while. And then, it was like there was no wind at all. The snow fell straight downwards, and it was as if the sounds had all vanished.

A figure stood beyond the snow children—a woman standing straight and tall, wearing a pure-white coat and fur hat. While she was beautiful, her face was like a statue; there was a cold, inorganic quality to her. She brought with her even more snow children, ten or twenty following her around.

"Lady Winter..." Belgrieve muttered.

The mother of the snow children, and the personification of winter itself. It was rare to come across her, and impossible to kill her—to do so would mean to purge winter from the entire world. However, Belgrieve did not fear her. Lady Winter was a manifestation of nature like the snow children. She had no love for humans, but she did not hate them either.

He had come across this great spirit of winter by chance, once before.

The sky was a pearly gray as snow fell from on high. Tall smokestacks rose here and there through the mounds. Winter mornings were slow, and many houses were only now having breakfast.

Angeline—who was seven at the time—walked a few steps ahead of him. Her small footsteps dotted the thin, fresh coating of snow, and at times, she would nearly slip, faltering this way and that. She would stick her hands out to regain her balance.

“You don’t have to be in such a hurry, Ange,” Belgrieve called out to her, and she turned. She breathed a white breath, a wide grin on her face. The cold had turned her cheeks and nose red.

“It’s a race, dad!” she said and started running off. However, she kept slipping as she had before, and was barely going any faster. Belgrieve gave a wry smile, speeding up a bit to give her a hug.

“All right, caught you.”

“Nooooo!”

When he nuzzled her cheek, she began squealing in delight. He had just decided to grow out his beard, and she must have found it ticklish.

A cold wave had set in the night before. It had snowed throughout the night and the ground was frozen solid by morning. Now a new layer sprinkled over it like confectioners’ sugar. Even as morning came, the village was silent as if it had been sealed in invisible ice. Even the crunching of the snow under their feet sounded as if it would echo for miles.

They slowly walked around the town, then headed for the plains beyond it. The white landscape seemed to extend to infinity. At times, Angeline would remember their race and run off, and each time, Belgrieve would catch her, eliciting her happy complaints.

The peppering of snow gradually changed to a large and soft sheet. Angeline brushed the snow off her cap, let out another breath, and watched, bemused by the shapes the white mass would take as it drifted off.

“Look, a dog! Oh, it’s gone...”

“I must have missed it. How about the next one?”

“Ah, the one you just breathed was Kerry’s face.”

“Hm? Really?”

“Honest,” Angeline said, before suddenly narrowing her eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“I hear something...”

Belgrieve honed his ears. It was a song, quiet yet clear. He lowered Angeline, put a hand on his hilt, and slowly made for the direction it was coming from. There was a silhouette in the snow. He focused his eyes. A woman, surrounded by children.

He felt a chill run down his spine—that was no human.

Alarmed, he drew his sword after a moment’s hesitation.

The woman looked at him, and he swallowed his breath. She was so arrestingly beautiful it was as if his body had frozen over. Her eyes were like ice; he couldn’t conceive any interest in him in their gaze. She looked at him as she would look at a bug on the ground, like a giant glancing down at some lesser life-form.

Angeline cowered behind him. Belgrieve was terrified—this was the fear and awe he felt towards nature itself, but at the moment, it was as though he was being intimidated by a fiend. He thought he might be sweating, despite being cold as ice.



Belgrieve gently patted Angeline on the head. “Ange...can you get home alone?”

“Huh... Dad?”

He focused the strength in his body. His heart pounded loudly, and he could feel the blood racing through his veins.

“You’re not laying a hand on her!” Raising his sword, Belgrieve raced towards the woman.

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The being looked at Belgrieve’s face, mildly surprised.

“OH, TRANSIENT ONE. YOU’VE GROWN SO OLD IN NO TIME AT ALL,” she said, her dignified voice like glistening ice. It was hard to say whether she had actually spoken aloud or if the air itself was simply vibrating to her whim.

To eternal beings like her, a human was the sort of existence that was gone in the blink of an eye. “You shouldn’t measure us on your time, Eternal Mistress. It’s been ten years already.”

The lady stared at him blankly. “WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY TEN YEARS?”

“It means the seasons have cycled ten times, though I don’t know if that means anything when you only know winter.”

“PERHAPS. BUT TRANSIENT ONE, WHY HAVE YOU COME OUT IN THE COLD AGAIN?”

“I’m on patrol. The humans are afraid of fiends, you see... Although I don’t have to worry if you’re here.”

Lady Winter was neither hostile nor welcoming to fiends either. She was just as disinterested as she was with everything else. However, the fiends feared her, as she could easily rival even an S-Rank one. It could be said that there was no need to fear encountering fiends wherever Lady Winter went—although she came hand in hand with snowstorms and cold waves, which were dangerous in their own way.

Belgrieve relaxed and leaned on his stick. *Looks like I went out for nothing, he*

thought. But he got to meet the lady again and reminisce in ten-year-old memories. They were bitter memories, but he could look back on them and laugh.

The snow children were now dancing in an even larger circle with the ones the lady brought with her. She watched them and asked, “WHAT HAPPENED TO THE SMALL TRANSIENT ONE?”

“It’s been ten years, right? She went off to the capital on her own, and now, she’s making it as a fine adventurer.”

“YOU MORTALS DO LOVE TO BUSY YOURSELVES.”

“Maybe you’re just taking it too easy.”

“I’M SURE I JUST MET YOU THE OTHER DAY... WHY DID YOU TURN YOUR BLADE ON ME?”

Ten years ago, when he encountered Lady Winter, he had drawn his blade and stood before her to protect Angeline. The lady had disinterestedly sent him flying with just her fingertip—he was no match whatsoever.

I was young, I guess. He gave a somber smile. “I was trying to protect the little one. I mistook you for a fiend.”

“OH, IS THAT IT?”

There was an S-Rank fiend called an ice queen. It took on the form of a beautiful woman, but it was a dangerous and hostile being. It was just as rare to come across as Lady Winter, and the lady was just as merciless to those who attacked her, so a majority of adventurers could not tell the difference. Belgrieve had been none the wiser at the time.

Afterward, the village elder—Hoffman’s late father, who was past eighty at the time—told him about Lady Winter. He was ashamed of his own imprudence and shallow thinking.

Belgrieve pulled off his gloves and breathed on his fingers to warm them up.

“I’m grateful you didn’t kill me back then,” he said, pensively, “though I’m sure that was just a whim.”

Watching Belgrieve deprecate himself, it was as if the lady had smiled ever so

slightly. "WHAT REASON WOULD I HAVE TO KILL A PARENT PROTECTING THEIR CHILD?"

"I see... You're a parent too." Belgrieve chuckled, watching the snow children frolic in their circle. *So essentially, Ange saved my life.*

The snow continued to fall unrelentingly. He shivered.

If her children were out playing, Lady Winter wouldn't be leaving anytime soon. Belgrieve rolled his shoulders and gripped his walking stick again.

"I don't have to patrol if you're here. I'll be taking my leave."

"I AM NOT YOUR VILLAGE'S PROTECTOR, TRANSIENT ONE."

"Oh, I'm just making convenient use of you. Don't worry about it."

"A WARNING," she said after a moment, her voice suddenly sharper. Belgrieve, who had been about to turn back, narrowed his eyes and looked back at Lady Winter, ready for anything. She stared straight at him. "THE BEINGS WHO TRIED TO CONTROL EVEN WINTER ARE SOON TO WAKE."

"Does that have anything to do with the increase in fiends?" he asked gingerly.

"WHO KNOWS? THAT IS NONE OF MY CONCERN."

Belgrieve gazed into her icelike eyes. "Noble Lady...what are you going to do? What do you seek from us?"

Lady Winter calmly shook her head. "I SEEK NOTHING. I WILL LET IT RUN ITS COURSE."

"Thanks for the warning... I'll take it to heart."

The spirit wouldn't have said such a thing without purpose. However, perhaps because of the cold, his head wasn't working properly. He would have to think about it after returning home and warming up. Belgrieve turned on his heels and retreated with slow, thoughtful steps.

The songs of snow children reverberated through the winter landscape.

Chapter 10: The Guild Was Made of Stone

The guild was made of stone. Its limestone walls were most likely white once upon a time, but they were now a filthy gray.

Angeline entered the guild early in the morning, stifling a yawn, only to find the lobby in quite a clamor. There were far more people gathered than usual.

She took a sweeping glance and found plenty of faces she had never seen before. Some of them stared at her, rather rudely. When she glared at them, they glared back angrily, only to turn pale after their friends whispered something in their ears.

“Who are these guys supposed to be...” Angeline wondered, heading to the counter with a furrowed brow. She singled out Anessa and Miriam from the crowd in front of the counter and tried to call out to them, but the place was too boisterous for that.

Suddenly, she turned her eyes to the opposite side of the crowd, where a muscular old man wearing a weathered military cap and an Inverness cape was lifting up Guild Master Lionel by the scruff of his neck. Lionel looked even more worn out than usual—his stubble was thicker, and there were unhealthy-looking rings under his eyes.

“How sloppy can you be?!” the old man boomed. “Lionel! Are you even trying?!”

“Yes, well, Mr. Cheborg, I’m actually doing everything I can, despite how it may look... The abnormal fiend outbreaks are causing quite a bit of trouble. Also, you don’t have to be so loud.”

Seeing how pathetic Lionel acted, a spindly old man in a loose robe and a long white beard sighed. “How pathetic of you to let the situation get so bad you needed to call us in... Albeit, we might have some obligation in this case...”

Angeline raced forward joyfully. With one leap, she cleared the crowds and landed in the midst of the two old men.

“Muscle General! Old Man Silver!”

The two old faces lit up once they saw Angeline.

“Oh, Ange! Glad to see you out and about!”

“Of course... Who do you think you’re talking to?”

“Aha ha ha ha ha! You haven’t changed!”

The Muscle General—or rather, Cheborg—cackled thunderously as he chucked Lionel aside and started smacking Angeline on the back. She shook with each impact.

The tall old man grabbed Cheborg by the shoulder. “Oi, Cheborg, don’t hit Ange with that stupid strength of yours. I feel sorry for her.”

“Eh?! What?! You say something, Dortos?!”

“Don’t scream in my ears, fool!”

“Well, these days, see! My ears, they’ve been leaving me, see!”

“Why does that mean you have to shout?! Good grief... I’m glad you look well, Ange.”

Angeline smiled, seeing that the two of them hadn’t changed one bit. They were both former S-Rank adventurers, in their mid-sixties to early seventies—though they still looked like they were in splendid shape. They stood spry, with their backs straight.

Having been in the trade for close to fifty years, they retired roughly two years prior. And Angeline, who by that time had already begun to make a name for herself, quickly became a close friend of theirs.

These men, both feared on the battlefield, were like doting grandparents around her, and Angeline was quite fond of them too. Cheborg was known as the Destroyer, though his splendidly tempered muscles had earned him his other name from Angeline. He had apparently once been a soldier of Estogal, though his old cap was all that remained of those days. His arms—that had burst their way out of his torn sleeves—were both tightly packed with spell-bound tattoos, and he was a capable fighter who had pulverized many a fiend with his fists backed by muscle and magic.

Dortos was called Silverhead, as he wielded a silver spear. While slender and flexible, his body boasted three times the strength of any normal man, and he nimbly wielded with one hand a spear that would otherwise take two grown adults to carry. His spearmanship was the best in all of Estogal, the number of fiends he'd defeated already far beyond count.

Angeline began swinging on Cheborg's arm. "Are the two of you...making a comeback?"

"Course we are! Just look at how sloppy the young'uns are being!"

"It can't be helped. I can't just sit back and watch as so many fiends come out of the woodwork."

As soon as Dortos had said that, Cheborg burst into hearty laughter. "Aha ha ha ha! Quit trying to look all mature, Dortos! I know you're just raring to go on a rampage!"

"Silence. I don't want to hear that from you."

"Hmm... This is good news..." Angeline tilted her head. "But why did you retire anyways? You look healthy enough."

"Well of course, I needed to dote on my great-grandson! But these days, he's saying 'Shut up grampa,' you know! He doesn't let me look after him anymore! So I've got time to kill!"

"Could you pipe down a bit... I was simply exhausted. I never thought I'd live my whole life as an adventurer... But it looks like there's no escaping it now."

Angeline smiled, satisfied. Perhaps these unfamiliar faces in the lobby had been newly scouted to join the guild. She'd only started nagging him a week ago, yet the guild master had already gotten to work.

"You worked fast this time, Guild Master... Thank you!"

Still lying faceup from when Cheborg threw him, the guild master powerlessly laughed. "Ha ha... Yeah... It's half because of your pestering, but this old man did his best. I had to use those crazy expensive crystals to get in contact, then I negotiated with the lord and finally managed to put in a request from the city of Orphen, and it looks like my application got through. So they'll be mobilizing an

army and...well, thanks to that, the receptionists are all groggy because they can't go home, and the guild's funding has run short. And this old man's wallet is empty too... How am I supposed to survive tomorrow?"

"Normally, I would say, 'You should have done it sooner,' but what's done is done. I forgive you..."

Lionel sprung up, scratching his head with a sour face. "I mean, hear me out. We haven't had an outbreak in the last hundred years. Our obligatory service was reduced to a formality, and even the central guild office didn't have a manual for emergency situations. How was I supposed to know what to do...and who could have guessed it was going to get this bad? Central's full of hardheads who shout at me to do stuff, then shout at me for having done that stuff, and this old man just doesn't know anymore."

Dortos narrowed his eyes, stroking his beard. "That still doesn't explain your slow work, Lionel."

"I'm well aware of my own incompetence." Lionel sighed. "But I've been doing as much as an incompetent can do."

"Your failing is how you never rely on others in those cases. You only reached out to us after Ange told you..."

"For what it's worth, I contacted my old buddies in the imperial capital. But it would take at least a month to get here—nah, two months at this time of year, so they're taking their time..."

"That's why you need to act early. Has gaining status made you go daft?"

"You're harsh, Mr. Dortos. I'm already in tatters here. Please be kind..."
Lionel's head slumped down.

Meanwhile, the receptionists were shouting in the lobby, directing the newcomers around. They filtered out with nods and cracked knuckles.

There were roughly thirty people left around the counter, and they all seemed to be AA-Rank or higher. Angeline noticed another S-Rank adventurer she hadn't seen lately with his party. They had been running all over just as busily as she had, it seemed. However, there were supposed to have been two other S-Ranks as well—had they finally grown sick of Orphen?

Once only the higher ranks were left, Ange knew most of them and greeted a few. She saw a dozen or so elderly members—Cheborg’s and Dortos’s parties. All were past their sixties, having completely retired, yet the mere sight of them standing there spoke volumes of their legacy. They weren’t high-ranking adventurers for nothing.

Miriam and Anessa came over to Ange, their eyes wide as they stared at the reinstated parties.

“Morning Ange... That’s quite an assortment.”

“Morning. It’s pretty amazing.”

“Morning both of you... This is reassuring.” Angeline excitedly patted them on the shoulders.

“So what job am I supposed to do?” Dortos stroked his beard. “If you want me to stand around here until the next Calamity-Class appears, I’m leaving.”

Lionel scratched his head and frowned. “We don’t have the luxury for that. I’ve got you all together to strike at the source.”

“The source... You located it?”

“Word just came in yesterday and it’s not confirmed.” Lionel shrugged. “Even I don’t want to believe it, but it’s a demon.”

The adventurers were astir. Rumors of a demon’s revival had been going around for a while now, but everyone thought it was complete nonsense. Surely they only existed in legend.

“Is that true...?” Angeline leaned in.

“Again, no confirmation. There’s a limit to what I can investigate on my own, so I’m having someone else confirm it now.”

“Hmm? Guild Master, you investigated on your own? You didn’t just sign some papers?”

“Pretty much... I mean, everyone working at the guild’s a civilian, so I can only count on them to push pencils. If all our active adventurers are occupied, the old man’s gotta put in a bit of elbow grease. But I had to negotiate with the central guild and the lord whenever I had a spare moment, and I still had loads

of paperwork to do, so I wasn't getting far..."

"But you could've sent a lower rank adventurer or something..."

"No—how could I send a low-ranking adventurer to a place that's causing Calamity-Class fiends to pop up? I've assigned them where it's safe, not that there are many of those places these days..."

"But...what about the high-rank parties on their off days?"

Lionel offered a bitter smile. "Ms. Ange, an investigation won't end in a day or two... As it is, they're ticked off with being sent all over the place. If I put a request on top of that, this old man will be murdered in his sleep. I already have more than a few adventurers who left our guild in a rage..."

"Then what about the guild instructors..."

"Our instructors only deal with F-, E-, and sometimes D-Rank. They're A-Rank at best. There's a possibility they would be up against something AA-Rank and above, so I couldn't risk sending them... I'll level with you here—our high ranks are more of the genius types than the hard-working types. They suck at teaching."

"Ah, then, what about requesting adventurers from Estogal..."

"Ms. Ange... You know how requests work—whoever issues the request has to pay. If a person puts it in, a person pays. If a town puts it in, a town pays. And, if the guild issues a request, we have to use our guild budget, right? We are currently paying all the high-ranking adventurers a fixed salary to keep them with us, and the requests keep chipping away at our funds. The point is, we don't have enough finances to call in high-ranking adventurers from elsewhere. I got some help at first, but when the money ran out, that was it. That's just how it is with adventurers."

"B-But we're all under the same guild, right...? You could say you'll pay when the money comes in..."

Orphen's guild was already taking on work from the guilds in other towns. Angeline had taken those jobs a number of times.

Lionel awkwardly scratched his cheek. "I tried...but adventurers are more

pragmatic the higher up they get. Who in their right mind would risk their life for free? I really am sorry for sending you all over the place because I couldn't turn them down."

"I was paid for that, so I don't mind... But even if the adventurers are like that, what about the bonds between guilds? Don't they have an obligation or moral duty to help us?"

"The central guild has it set up so the ties between guild branches are actually pretty weak. Money speaks louder than any vague promises. There are a lot of vested interests, and the higher-ups really want to keep their jobs, you see. In any case, what adventurers want most is money, and the guilds on the outskirts are strapped for cash too, so they're not up to work for free without guaranteed results... You know, I paid everyone here handsomely, but they still left. What does that say about me? I'm going to cry..."

"Then...you've been doing it all alone?"

"More or less... Thanks to that, I've had to take on a few Calamity-Classes alone, and I haven't gotten a proper night's sleep in half a year, and I'm all worn out... I never pushed myself this hard when I was still an adventurer, did I?" Lionel heaved a large sigh and finished with a powerless laugh. "But I never thought all that training I did in secret after I lost to you would actually come in handy..."

Angeline would occasionally demand to see Lionel to complain. However, Lionel was generally out, and Angeline would convince herself he was only pretending. As it turned out, he was apparently off looking into the source of the outbreaks alone. As this was going on, he was also receiving claims and complaints from the adventurers, the central guild, and the lord.

The guild's system that had operated just fine in times of peace fell to pieces once something went wrong. However, peace had gone on for so long that various vested interests were formed and the system could not be overturned so easily. The fiends continued appearing, while Lionel was in the middle, receiving criticism from all parties. As expected of a former S-Rank, he endured and kept working under those circumstances.

He still prioritized the powerless. I guess he's a slacker and a slow worker, but

he's got an awkward sort of kindness to him, Angeline thought. Then she turned sullen.

"You could have just told me..."

"No... I didn't want to sound like I was making excuses. I know I'm telling you now, but—"

"But it's not like you were doing nothing, right? Now I look like the idiot for getting on my high horse and lecturing you... I'm sorry, Guild Master..."

Seeing her dejectedly lower her head, Lionel scratched his cheek again. "Ha ha, it's fine, perfectly fine. You weren't wrong, Ms. Ange, and it's true I'm incompetent... Not to mention, you were the only one who scolded me like that. Normally, they just leave without a word once they've had it with the guild. But you were honest and upfront, right? That was a nice push on the back. Thank you."

"Hmph..."

"Aha ha ha ha!" Cheborg laughed, roughly patting her downcast head. "Don't worry about it, Ange! When the adults all stand around doing boring adult stuff, the kids charge forward and move the world! We wouldn't be here if you hadn't pushed him! Lionel! Why didn't you call us before you went off doing crazy things on your own?! I don't think you're cut out to be guild master!"

Dortos nodded, gently patting Angeline's shoulder. "He's right, Ange. It's his own fault for letting the situation get so bad that the guild master had to personally go out. It's usually inconceivable for an adventurer to give up on a guild and run away. This is all his habitual slacking coming back to bite him."

Lionel hung his head, crushed by the words of the two old hands.

"You're too harsh, both of you. In the first place, I'd call the country and central guild system defective... No matter what I tell them, those bigwigs at central and the lord only think about shirking responsibility and cutting budgets—what am I supposed to do? I was an adventurer, I never studied for this. How am I supposed to compete with all those sly old badgers..."

"Eh?! What?! You say something, Lionel?!"

“Fine, whatever! C’mon now! I’ll explain on the way!”

Lionel squared his shoulders as he stomped out of the building. The gathered old soldiers burst into laughter as they followed, and Angeline’s party left with them.

○

The sunlight hit them as they walked out. There hadn’t been any thick clouds these past few days, and while the wind was chilly, the sun was warm. Some bits of melting snow lingered on the road.

The party Lionel led left the city, dividing into separate carriages to head east. There were more soldiers on the ramparts than usual, making it clear that the lord was mobilizing the army. Angeline watched with a sour face.

“Why does it take so long to move their army?”

“It takes a lot of time and money to move an army, apparently. That’s why the requests come to the guild instead. It’s like it’s the guild’s job to defend the territory from fiends now,” Anessa answered.

Miriam nodded. “That wasn’t a problem until now, though. If slacking worked out for them for so long, they’re going to be slow when they finally have to get moving.”

“Yeah, and I hear there’s a war brewing on the eastern border, so they’re putting most of their manpower into that. Not that any of that matters if their nation is crushed by fiends.”

“My thoughts exactly... But that should end today. I don’t know about demons or whatnot, but we’re going to destroy it!”

“Heh heh, I’m looking forward to this... But the old ones are here, so they might get to it first.”

“I can’t lose... Let’s show them what the active adventurers are capable of.”

According to Lionel, a large mass of mana was detected in an abandoned dungeon near Orphen. Everyone had been expecting it to be quite a high-ranking dungeon, but it turned out to be E-Rank. Because of this, Lionel had initially assigned lower-ranking parties to its general area; these parties failed to

detect the abnormality, and it went largely overlooked. This set the investigation back quite a bit.

The power from this mass of mana would seep through the subsoil and overflow at various hotspots, which would in turn influence the fiends and cause mass outbreaks, apparently.

Angeline pursed her lips, her elbow on her knee and her hand propping up her cheek.

“Mana travels through soil? I didn’t know that...”

Miriam did not look any less bemused. “Not usually. This demon’s mana must be incredible.”

“It must be a powerful foe... What kind of opponent could it be?”

“It doesn’t matter what it is... We will simply crush it.”

Anessa sighed at Ange’s cruel indifference. “I’m scared that it really will turn out like that...”

The carriage raced for just under an hour through a small forest and arrived at an expanse of hills. A cave in the side of the tallest one among them connected to what had once been an underground dungeon. However, it had lost its core quite a while ago and had been abandoned after that. Adventurers no longer went there, as there was no reason to do so.

This time, they would enter and hunt down the supposed cause of the mana accumulation—presumably a demon.

The carriages stopped, and the adventurers disembarked.

Angeline rubbed her aching behind, scowling at the dungeon entrance. She did not feel anything abnormal. *Is there really anything here?*

Suddenly, she noticed someone standing at the entrance with long, dull, gray hair, a thick coat, and a scarf. Whoever it was wore clothing so thick it hid every line of their body.

Lionel jogged up to them. “How was it, Ms. Maria? Did you sense anything wrong?”

“Nothing. But there’s definitely a distorted lump of mana in there. Someone set up a barrier so it couldn’t be detected from the outside, and whoever did it is a master of their craft. That’s why you’re not getting any mana or fiends out here.”

“I knew it... So what about the soil?”

“Thanks to the barrier, the mana’s got nowhere to go but down. It’s bleeding into the earth—no wonder the fiends are all excited. Good grief, how could you leave a delicate maiden out here alone? *Cough, cough.*”

Turning to him with a hacking noise was the displeased face of a seemingly young woman. Her comely visage gave off a somewhat listless atmosphere. While clearly a woman, when she stood next to Lionel it became apparent that she was quite tall.

Much like before, Angeline gleefully rushed up to the woman. “Granny Maria!”

“*Cough, hack...* Huh? Ange? That you? Still a brat, I see.”

“Are you all right, granny? How’s your illness...?”

“It’s terrible. Never felt worse. *Cough...* Yet that man still drags me out like this.” While she continued to complain, she didn’t seem very dissatisfied at all as she petted Ange on the head. She glanced at Anessa and Miriam as well. “Oi, girls, you getting on all right? You’re not looking very happy to see—” She choked mid-sentence and burst into another coughing fit.

Anessa quickly ran up and rubbed her back. “Don’t push yourself, Maria... You’re already at that age.”

“*Hack...* Shut it, I’m still a peachy sixty-eight.”

“Sixty-eight’s not peachy, ya old hag!” Miriam pointed and chuckled.

Maria glared at her. “Stupid disciple! What do you think you’re saying to your master?! *Cough, hack!*”

“Aha ha, it’s what you deserve for tormenting your disciples. Serves you right.”

“Damn brat... *Hack, cough!*” Maria’s anger got her into yet another coughing

fit. Anessa hurriedly rubbed her back while Miriam gleefully laughed at her misery.

She was an S-Rank adventurer who had retired three years prior. She was Miriam's instructor, a master magician called both the Dragonslayer and the Ashen. Owing to her great achievements in exterminating vile fiends and developing beneficial magics, her name was known not just in the dukedom, but throughout the Rhodesian Empire.

As her powerful mana had halted her body in time, she looked incredibly young for sixty-eight. However, when she slew the curse dragon, an S-Rank fiend, she was splashed with its blood and came under its curse. Her body was being eaten away, and she was tormented with permanent chills, spasmodic pain, and coughing. None of that changed the fact she was one of the empire's greatest magicians.

Dortos and Cheborg came up. Dortos stroked his beard, looking pleasantly surprised. "Ah, Maria, he dragged you into this too?"

Maria clicked her tongue and narrowed her eyes. "Oh, Dortos... Pretty much. Good grief, what's the use in gathering all these decrepit old folk? *Cough, cough!*"

Seeing her break into coughs once again, Cheborg shouted, "Maria! Still haven't gotten over that fake sickness of yours?! Get a grip, lady!"

"It's not fake, goddammit! Just die, you lump of—*Hack! Cough, cough!*"

"Eh?! What?! You say something, Maria?!"

"I told you to drop dead! Or I could kill you just as well myself!"

"Um...can I talk yet?"

Left in the corner by these belated reunions, Lionel piped up with a fed-up look on his face. The old ones smiled, signaling for him to go on.

He sighed. "Um, I had Ms. Maria look into it. There's definitely a mass of mana in there that's spreading through the soil. If we can take it out, I think these mass fiend outbreaks should calm down."

"What should we do...? What's the plan, Guild Master?"

“Yes... Consider this a normal dungeon exploration, and aim for the deepest part. It was originally E-Rank, so it shouldn’t be too deep. Though it’s possible the mana’s boosted the rank of the fiends in there... But, well, with so many strong fighters here...”

“Enough yapping! Point is, we blast our way through!”

“No, wait—”

Cheborg had raised his fist before Lionel could stop him. His cape fluttered in the wind, as all the magic circles on his arm burst into light, and he smacked down on the hill ahead of him. They were subsequently assailed by a fearsome shockwave, and more than half of the hill itself was blown to smithereens. Fragments of dirt and rock came down like rain.

“Ah, the barrier’s gone... *Cough*,” Maria muttered.

This was followed by an outpouring of fiends from the hole—all that remained of the dungeon entrance—wrapped in a sinister miasma. It was supposed to be an E-Rank dungeon, yet Angeline could make out B-and even A-Rank fiends.

Lionel held his head. “What have you done...”

“Aha ha ha ha! Saves us the trouble! Oi, demon, get out here!”

“Wait, Cheborg. You’re not getting ahead of me.”

Cheborg laughed and swung his fists, erasing every fiend that came before him. He burst off towards the hole. Dortos removed the cloth from his spear as he chased behind, skewering several nearby fiends in the blink of an eye. He no longer looked like a good-natured old man—he had taken on the visage of a warrior, and he seemed to be greatly enjoying himself.

Two old men had taken the merry plunge into a horde of fiends, tearing their way through without difficulty. Their elderly cohorts followed behind, slaughtering fiend after fiend with frightening competency. They all seemed so lively despite their age. Were they in such high spirits because all of them missed their days of battling fiends?

Looking back at the dumbfounded mass of younger, still-active adventurers,

Lionel shook his head, clapped his hands together, and shouted, “Okay, how about we show our elders some respect! Go off, set the stage so your seniors can show their stuff!”

Regaining their composure at these words, the rest of the adventurers readied their weapons.

Chapter 11: The Fiends Poured Out

The fiends poured out of the hole one after another. However, as was to be expected of a group of high-ranking adventurers, they managed to mop up the fiends without issue.

It was then that a conspicuously larger one breached the surface. It was vaguely humanoid but boasted a bizarre form, like an unnatural amalgamation of several other fiends. Miasma poured from its mouth with every breath it took.

The adventurers were astir.

“Ugh, the hell’s that...?”

“Wow, disgusting!”

“This distorted mana is melding fiends together, *cough*...but so be it. It’s a shoddy, low-mana good-for-nothing.” Maria looked at the fiend with irritation, lifting one of her emaciated fingers. “Work with me, stupid apprentice. We’re casting Lightning Emperor.”

“Hmph, so condescending.”

Miriam sullenly held up her staff. The two chanted together, “May the myriad beads of false dawn be as one—raise a wave to call down an earth-shattering bolt.”

Translucent geometric figures materialized around the pair; light burst from Maria’s finger and the tip of Miriam’s staff. All the while, sinister black clouds swiftly formed over the fiend’s head.

The moment it seemed the lightning would fall, Anessa immediately fired an iron arrow, which stuck into the forehead of the grotesque fiend. In a mere split second, a furious flash erupted from the dark clouds, all of its tendrils coalescing on the arrow. After a moment spent trembling, the fiend scattered into dust.

Maria looked at Anessa, pleasantly surprised. “*Cough...* Not bad at all, girl. Good assist.”

“I’ve hung around Merry long enough,” she replied a bit bashfully. Her diffidence did not stop her from unleashing unending arrows, taking out fiends who were trying to attack the other adventurers from behind. Maria and Miriam followed suit, firing off magic that charred many a fiend to a crisp.

Meanwhile, Angeline observed the scene with folded arms.

“Now what should I do...”

The fiends poured out with no end in sight. While the adventurers were overwhelming them at the moment, they were hardly making any progress. Now that the barrier had been dispelled, the dungeon was emitting a great deal of magic, and perhaps other, outside fiends would be drawn in by it. The adventurers’ movements would dull the more their fatigue piled up, which would lower their chances of victory should they come face to face with a demon.

“We’re at a disadvantage the longer this drags on.” Angeline drew her sword. She turned to Miriam and Anessa. “Cover me.”

Then, she was off before they could reply. She did not confront any fiends, instead slipping straight through them and arriving at the dungeon’s entrance in no time at all. Any fiends that tried attacking her along the way were eliminated by arrows and magic.

Cheborg and Dortos had run amok near the entrance, and the corpses of fiends of A-Rank and higher littered the ground. This was closer to a massacre than a battle.

Angeline spotted Dortos and called out to him. “Old Man Silver, we’re getting nowhere... Let’s leave the small fries to everyone else and get in there.”

“Makes sense. Oi, you lot! You’ve got my back!” Dortos yelled at his party members behind him. It took just a moment for them to swiftly change formation, and they were immediately at work exterminating the fiends around the entrance. They were elites, and it showed—while there were still plenty of fiends to go, a straight path into the dungeon would soon be secured.

“Pushovers, the lot of them! We’re going deeper!” Cheborg thrust out his fist. The symbols covering his arm lit up as a tremendous blast wave swept up every fiend in that general direction.

Angeline immediately accelerated, leaping into the dungeon entrance. Dortos and Cheborg weren’t far behind.

“What’s this...?” she muttered as she touched down.

The dungeon was originally E-Rank and its interior was supposed to be nothing more than hollowed-out earth; now the walls were covered in an ominous black substance, occasionally flickering with pale light and pulsing like a living being. It was as if she had jumped into the mouth of some unknown life-form.

In any case, Angeline raced ahead. She heard Cheborg shouting from behind her, “Ange! Give me the first blow!”

“First come, first served. Have you gotten too old to outpace me?”

“Aha ha ha ha! Looks like I’m becoming the pushover here! Interesting!”

“Don’t let your guard down. They’re coming.”

Fiends gushed forth from the holes to the top and sides of the tunnel. In the blink of an eye, Dortos had skewered three, then bisected two as he swept his spear aside. Cheborg utterly pulverized whatever came at him with his fists.

“Where is the main body...?” Despite the onslaught, Angeline barely took any of them on herself. She squinted her eyes, focusing on the traces of mana, and chased after them. She had two old soldiers defending her, so she could take the lead.

She came to a stop once she reached a fork in the path. Dortos and Cheborg continued mowing down fiends, letting her do her job. Remaining wary, Angeline concentrated. *Think back. What did dad tell me? The boss fiend’s presence should feel like needles pricking the skin. Yes, that’s it. I’ve been in enough dungeons to know.*

However, with so many powerful fiends around, the presence was feeble. She couldn’t focus enough in the midst of battle.

“This isn’t good enough... Dad will laugh at me.”

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She stopped thinking about it, and strangely enough, it was as if the surrounding clamor had grown very distant. Her senses sharpened to compensate, and from the surges of mana, the prickling sensation came from...

“This way!” Angeline’s eyes shot open and she burst off.

It seemed to be the right way, as the presence grew thicker the further she pressed on. There were a few small chambers on the sides, but no major branches. Luckily, this was a former E-Rank dungeon, and its structure wasn’t so complex.

“Just a little more...” Angeline muttered.

It was then that she felt an intense wave of mana from the wall beside her. She immediately readied her sword to defend herself. Not a second later, a massive fiend burst through it. It looked similar to a lizard, yet its hind limbs were far bigger and it stood much taller than Angeline. Its fangs and claws appeared to be incredibly sharp, and its scales had a tough-looking black luster. Though it had no wings to fly, she wondered if it might be a subspecies of dragon.

Angeline managed to catch its charge but was thrown back by its momentum. She twisted in the air and landed without difficulty.

“Grr... Get out of the way...”

“Aha ha ha ha ha! A surprise attack, eh?! This lizard knows its stuff!” Cheborg laughed and pummeled the dragon. However, the fiend was only pushed back a bit, glaring at him unharmed. Its large, goggling eyes seemed to have trouble focusing—something was driving it mad. A faint veil of miasma leaked from its mouth.

With a heroic smile on his lips, Cheborg straightened his cap. “Oh! Not too shabby, are you?! Hey! Let me have him! Okay?! How about it?!”

“Do whatever you want! Let’s go, Ange.”

“Be careful, General...”

Leaving Cheborg with the large dragon, Angeline followed Dortos further down the corridor. She heard panting and looked to the side. Dortos was growing a little winded. He massaged his chest, soothing his aching lungs.

“Tsk... Why did I have to grow old...”

“Are you all right, Silver...?”

“This is nothing. No need to worry, Ange,” Dortos said, grinning.

Ange, on the other hand, furrowed her brow. “Old man... That’s apparently what they call a ‘death flag.’”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It was in a book I read.”

“I don’t understand these youngsters and their newfangled words...” Dortos sighed.

They mowed through many more fiends on their way down. The presence grew thicker and thicker, and Ange could feel the prickling sensation growing stronger alongside it. She had fought many S-Rank fiends before, but none of them felt like this.

This will be a first for me. She trembled with excitement. She felt no fear—rather, she found herself hopeful to fight a formidable foe.

“Heh...” She renewed her grip on her sword, and cut straight through an encroaching fiend. Her blood boiled.

She soon found herself in a vast chamber, where she came to a stop. The ceiling was round, like a dome, but every surface was still covered with that sickly substance, flickering and pulsing. The fiends were suddenly gone the moment she entered that space. It was filled with a peculiar atmosphere, and the needles of mana were practically digging into her flesh now.

There was something in the center. It was like a black shadow but had a humanlike form. It was small, crouching on the floor like an infant, rocking left and right.

“Is that...a demon?”

“Be on your toes, Ange. Something feels off.” Dortos quickly took a stance with his spear.

The shadow muttered as it rocked. Angeline honed her ears to pick it up.

“Master... Master... Where did you go...? I’m lonely... So lonely,” it repeated under its breath with a childlike voice.

Angeline cocked her head. Whatever it was, it was certainly the center of the distortion. Yet, as far as she could tell, it didn’t mean any harm. It gave off a terrifyingly innocent impression, which only made it uncannier.

Angeline, as though in a trance, stepped nearer and found herself talking to it. “Hey...what are you so sad about...? Who is your master?”

“Ange?!” Dortos cried out to her.

A chill raced down her spine, and she immediately leaped to one side. The creature was now standing where she had been an instant before.

“Lonely... So lonely... If I kill more...can I see him again...?”

Eyes sprouted in what was presumably its face, staring at Ange. Its pupils were pitch black, filled with madness; it was as if she would be sucked in if her gaze lingered.

Dortos’s spear sallied forth like the wind. The thing took the blow head-on and was sent flying back.

However, Dortos clicked his tongue. “I can’t pierce it... It seems it’s not called a demon for nothing.”

At the end of its flight, the thing splattered to the ground, then slowly, unsteadily got to its feet. It held its arms out front like an innocent child reaching for its mother, as if it wanted to be held.

Angeline took in a deep breath and readied her sword.

“Sorry Silver... I let my guard down.”

“Glad to have you back... Here it comes.”

The two of them ran in different directions. The shadow was dead set on pouncing at Angeline, springing at her far faster than a wolf. The eyes were

gone from its apparent face, and all that remained was a large, red gash of a mouth, lined with several rows of sharp fangs.

Nevertheless, she was still an S-Rank adventurer; as long as she wasn't taken by surprise, its speed was hardly threatening at all. She found the distorted mana coiling around her to be rather irritating, but it wasn't enough to dull her movements.

Angeline lowered her stance and slashed as it came at her. Her blade connected with surprising ease; it didn't even feign dodging. However, it was simply knocked back without being sliced through once again.

"Hrah!" As the shadowy figure flew, Dortos circled around and thrust his spear through it with monstrous momentum. He thrust again, and again, his flurry falling upon it with the force of a meteor shower.

Even the shadowy being struggled to bear it, blasting off and colliding with the wall with a grating sound. It slopped to the ground, yet still tottered to its feet.

"Ma...ster... So lonely..."

"Begone!" Dortos twisted, coiling his entire body like a spring, and used that force in his next thrust. Rarely had this move failed to spell certain death for his past foes.

Once again, the shadow took the brunt of the spear—or so it seemed.

"Hmm?!" Dortos's eyes widened in surprise. It had caught his spear with its fangs and bit into the tip, exerting more and more strength. His silver spear made a noise as though it was crying out.

Angeline used its immobility as a chance to kick it square in the abdomen, sending it somersaulting along the floor until it smacked into the wall.

"You okay, Silver...?"

"Sorry for that, Ange. To think it could crack a magic-coated spear..."

There were fissures and nicks running down the blade. Dortos grimaced at these unforeseen wounds adorning the comrade that had gotten him through thick and thin for many long years.

“I’ll handle it.” Angeline stepped out. “Stand back.”

“Fine... How pathetic of me.” Dortos fell back, gathering his frenzied breath.

It leaped again, and with its mouth wide open, chomped down on Angeline’s sword. She took aim at its stomach and kicked it upward. As it let go of her sword, reeling at the impact, she coiled her body and thrust.

Dortos had to doubt his eyes for a moment. What she had done was nearly identical to his own attack, splendidly utilizing the spring of her entire body. However, even that was unable to pierce it.

Angeline clicked her tongue. It crashed into the wall, where it staggered to its feet again. However, while it looked like it had taken a bit of damage, the next instant it was coming at Angeline just as fast as before. Its movements were gradually growing more precise as if fighting Angeline was causing it to remember how to fight.

Angeline accelerated to match it. Their clash slowly grew so intense that Dortos himself would have hesitated to step into it, even if his spear was in a usable state.

Approaching, withdrawing, approaching again... Angeline felt a chill each time its sharp fangs grazed her body. Its hands were scary as well. It had no claws or nails on its flat, featureless arms, yet she would get goosebumps each time she evaded a swipe. This thing was like a highly dense mass of mana, and presumably, a clean blow would completely erase her arm.

How long had it been since she felt her life was in danger? On the contrary, this lit a fire in her soul. Her sword arm and her legs were moving before her thoughts reached them. Each time she sped up, it was as if the world had slowed down. Only the thing she fought seemed to move as she did.

After several dozen more exchanges, Angeline sent it flying with her sword. She couldn’t cut it no matter how many times she sliced it. This seemed wholly unproductive.

Does it even feel fatigue? She didn’t know.

However, it seemed to be unsteady every time it took an attack, so her efforts must have been doing something. Angeline was a bit winded, and blood seeped

from her shallow wounds. However, she couldn't give up—not to mention, this was the very being preventing her from going home.

This thing stands between me and my father. The thought was enough to ignite her rage.

It was still muttering even as they fought, as if it didn't see Angeline at all. "I want to...see you...Master... Where did you go...? Ba'al has been good for you..."

"I don't know who you want to meet...but I have someone I want to see too."

Angeline calmly took her stance and concentrated. The mana within her body coiled and swirled, and she could feel it circulate like blood all through her with each breath. Through her fingertips, through her sword—the mana bound her blade and hand as one. Her sword responded to this with an intense radiance.

"If you want to see him so badly...quit dawdling around here, and find him already!"

Angeline kicked off the ground. It came at her, its fangs bared.

They met—and her sword cleaved through it.

"Mas...ter..."

Her shoulder was ablaze; she could feel blood pouring from it. She hadn't lost her arm, but she couldn't exert any strength with it. *Did I put too much into that attack?*

Angeline fell to her knees, and Dortos propped her up before she collapsed onto the ground. She tried to focus but was too winded after putting her all into that final clash. Still, she managed to lift her face.

"Old Man Silver... How does it look...?"

Dortos gently smiled and nudged her in its direction. She looked over her shoulder. It was on the ground in two pieces. Its body seethed and bubbled until finally, it began to melt away. She could feel the distorted mana dispersing. The sinister substance covering the walls faded, lost its light, and crumbled away.

Angeline looked at Dortos. "Did we win...?" she asked after a moment.

“Yes, it is our victory. Nicely done, Ange.”

The energy drained from her in her relief, and she nearly collapsed. Dortos frantically caught her once more, as the Black-Haired Valkyrie fell into a deep, peaceful sleep.

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As the adventurers packed up, the abandoned dungeon was left in silence. Behind the remnants of the creature stood someone hooded and tall, wearing pure-white robes in stark contrast to the darkness.

The figure looked at the thing, now a melted, black puddle of liquid, and clicked its tongue.

“What a pathetic state I’ve found you in...” The figure spoke in low tones—seemingly a man’s voice. The robed person held his hand over the puddle and began to chant. His fingertips glowed, the pool sparkling in its light. Soon, a small shadow stood in the puddle, drawing the liquid into itself like a sponge. The thing teetered left and right before noticing the man.

“Master... Master?”

It staggered towards him, holding out its arms. However, the man violently kicked it in frustration.

“Fool! Do I look like Solomon to you?!”

The shadow rolled along the ground before wobbling to its feet.

“Mas...ter...? Where...? Ba’al is...right here...”

The robed man clicked his tongue again. “Enough. Just lay low until you regain your power.” He waved his hand; the thing floated in the air, before condensing into a small, black gemstone and settling in his palm.

The robed man stuffed it into his pocket and muttered, “Was I too hasty...? No, I misjudged Orphen’s guild. I thought they were incompetent, but they managed to sniff this place out... Worse yet is the Black-Haired Valkyrie...but whatever. We haven’t even started yet.”

He turned on his heel and walked off.

Angeline opened her eyes and found herself in the guild's sickroom. Anessa and Miriam sat there beside her with anxious looks on their faces. When she awakened, Miriam's eyes filled with tears, and she clung to her.

"Ange! Thank the gods! I thought you were dead!"

"You're making a big deal out of it, Merry... And wait, my shoulder hurts... It hurts, I'm telling you!"

"C'mon Merry, she said it hurts."

On Anessa's prompting, Miriam parted with a sob.

"But I'm glad you're all right... You really defeated a demon." Despite Anessa's wry smile, her eyes were still a bit bleary.

How long have I been out? Angeline cocked her head. While her shoulder was bandaged, the rest of her clothing had been left untouched. Her shoulder throbbed, and she had not recovered from her fatigue. According to her friends, she had slept through the entire carriage ride back. It had grown dark, but the day hadn't ended, and the lobby by the sickroom was in a hubbub. The other adventurers seemed to be discussing something there.

"Is everyone still here...?"

"Yeah, though Maria left, saying her throat hurt."

"She sure is coldhearted, that hag-in-teen's-clothing!"

Miriam pouted. Angeline laughed. While the woman could be quite caustic, it was easy to imagine her worrying about Angeline in secret.

Her shoulder hurt, but she could still stand. She wobbled to her feet, leaving with Anessa and Miriam's assistance.

In the lobby, the adventurers who took part in the demon hunt crowded around the tables and leaned against the walls, talking about this and that. They seemed to be exchanging their frank opinions on where the guild was headed from there on out.

The clamor was replaced by cheers as soon as they spotted Angeline.

Everybody stood, holding up their weapons, and raised their voices.

“Angeline! The Black-Haired Valkyrie!”

“The Demon Slaying Hero!”

“Guardian of Orphen!”

“Quit it... You’re making me feel funny...” Angeline bashfully fidgeted, her cheeks touched with red.

Cheborg roughly patted her head with a laugh. “Aha ha ha ha! A demon slayer! I knew you had it in you, Ange! Can’t believe I let you get one up on me!”

“Muscle General... My shoulder hurts, please let me off today...”

“Eh?! What?! You say something, Ange?!”

“Mr. Cheborg, Ange has injured her shoulder. Please do not be so violent with her.” Lionel pulled back Cheborg’s hand. Then he turned to Angeline and bowed his head. “Ange, dear Ange, you have my utmost gratitude. I offer my thanks as the guild master of Orphen. I am truly sorry for my incompetence. It is thanks to you that the city—and by extension, our guild—is safe. I cannot thank you enough. I will offer something proper once things have calmed down, so—”

“Guild Master,” Angeline interrupted, looking quite displeased. “You’re creepy when you act respectable... Stop.”

“O-Of course.” The adventurers laughed and prodded Lionel teasingly. Lionel scratched his head with a bitter smile. “Fine, well, same as usual then... In any case, it should be mostly over after we clean up the remaining Calamity-Class fiends. It’s all thanks to you taking care of the demon. Thank you.”

“I see... Then, there’s a bit more work to do?”

“No, about that...”

Lionel looked at the other adventurers. Dortos nodded to him in encouragement, arms akimbo. “We will take care of it. So Ange, take the vacation you always dreamed of. No one will hold you back. In fact, there will be no need to take a holiday anymore, you should be free to take whatever jobs you want,” the guildmaster pronounced.

“But...”

“Aha ha ha ha! Don’t worry about it, Ange! Just goes to show we’ve still got some rampaging left in us! Real embarrassing when I say it out loud!” Cheborg said, eliciting laughter and nodding from the retired adventurers.

“Then you’ll be back for the time being?” Ange asked.

Lionel nodded and shrugged. “It’s worked out that way. With their assistance, I’m thinking of conducting a fundamental restructuring of the guild... This experience really hammered home that we need to do away with all the pointless red tape and formalities. We’ll need to set Orphen up as an independent regional guild with its own system or else... So this is no time to slack off.”

“Naturally. There’s no telling when this will happen again. Lionel, you let it get this bad, so it makes sense that you should rebuild it properly. I will have my eye on you to ensure that.”

“Then how about swapping with me, Mr. Dortos? There’s really no point in an incompetent like me putting in the work...”

“You’ve passed the point of no return—take responsibility to the end. As long as you don’t foolishly take everything upon yourself, you won’t fail too badly.”

Hearing that, Cheborg burst into a grand smile. “What are you putting on an act for, Dortos?! You just want to swing up a storm because you’re frustrated about that demon breaking your spear! I can tell, I can!”

“Ah, shut it, you meathead...”

“Aha...ha... *Sigh*... But it’s going to get busy. I need to have a proper talk with our lord about the city’s defenses... Rather, we’ve completely run out of money. First, I’ll need a plan to raise some... Ah, man. You know, guild master was supposed to be the sort of figurehead position for incompetents... I’m really counting on you guys, okay?” Lionel sighed.

Angeline smiled, satisfied.

Once she had relaxed, her stomach began grumbling. She needed to eat something. *I’ll go to the usual pub*, she thought. She turned to leave and started

walking when Cheborg stopped her.

“Come to think of it, Ange!”

“What’s up, General?”

“I heard from Lionel! I’m surprised you put up with this situation! It was a huge burden on you, right?! Any normal adventurer would have grown sick of it and stormed off to another guild long ago! Hell, that’s what I’d have done!”

Dortos nodded. “Indeed. Hunt after hunt, every waking hour of the day. No free-spirited adventurer should have to endure that. What’s more, you want to see your father, don’t you? You could have ignored your requests and gone anyway. While the guild was faced head-on with an unprecedented situation, they were a bit too overbearing. Your reputation as an adventurer would not have suffered if you left.”

Lionel awkwardly scratched his head. “I know, right... My hands were full, but it was completely my fault.”

Angeline looked at them with a blank look on her face. “I mean...if I did that, it would be the civilians who suffered. Not the guild. Like the pub master, and the children at the orphanage, and the bakers at the cake shop... My dad told me it’s only natural for strong adventurers to help the weak... He wouldn’t be proud of me if I abandoned Orphen to go home.”

Dortos, Cheborg, and the other adventurers were momentarily stunned before erupting into sudden laughter. Each and every one of them laughed from the depths of their hearts with such force the building shook from its foundations.

“That’s a riot! Ange! You’ve got a great dad there!”

“My thoughts exactly... Good grief. I’m so old, but I’ve still got some growing up to do...”

“So you didn’t leave the guild because of your father... That’s one more person this old man is indebted to...”

The old hands guffawed at the guild master.

Anessa ruffled up Angeline’s hair, looking moved to the core, while Miriam

clung to her in tears. Seeing all the excited adventurers, Angeline proudly stuck out her chest and declared, “That’s right! My dad is amazing! People call him the Red Ogre Belgrieve! The Red Ogre! Remember the name!”

Chapter 12: As the Snow Melted

As the snow melted, leaving speckles on the ground, two opposing figures swung their swords—one with red hair, the other platinum blonde. It was Belgrieve and Sasha.

Spring had graced the village of Turnera, and as the mountain flowers burst into bloom all at once, the piles of snow thawed, leaving mottled spots on the soil. Wheat shoots were beginning to peek out of the snow, growing vigorously as they basked in the light of the sun.

The moment the snow vanished, Turnera's residents would immediately begin tending the fields: wheat would be threshed, soil would be revitalized, and potatoes would be planted. Once all that was done, it would be time for the spring festival. Each and every farmer would be hard at work stretching their bodies after having been unable to move in the winter.

Belgrieve, too, had been immersed in spring work when the snow had finally melted enough to clear the roads and Sasha paid him a visit. Before he could even ask why she had come, she immediately bowed her head and asked for another sparring match—to which Belgrieve assented with a wry smile. He had not missed his training for a single winter day, but it was hard to say he had trained to his satisfaction. A part of him did want to let loose for once. Farmwork and swordplay used different muscles.

Both warriors swung their sheathed swords. Sasha's movements were far more refined than they had been the last time they'd fought, and each blow was far heavier. She shifted her center of gravity more smoothly, so that she was less often swinging with just the strength of her arms.

At first, they seemed equally matched, yet gradually, Belgrieve was driven into a corner. This was not like him at all, and he found himself growing heated.

"Hrr! Yah!"

"Gah!"

A strike from Sasha sent his sword flying out of his hands. Her face lit up. However, Belgrieve immediately reached out, grabbed her wrist, and twisted it. She dropped her sword with a yelp, and the moment he heard that Belgrieve let go in a panic.

“I-I’m sorry Sasha! That was force of habit... Are you injured?”

Her eyes teary, Sasha shook her head. “No, that was my fault... As expected of my Master! The most dangerous moment in battle is when you’ve dropped your guard thinking you’ve won! To think you would purposely go easy on me to teach me that... I, Sasha Bordeaux, still have a long way to go...”

“No... No, listen, I was serious there...”

“Next time, I will land a strike without letting my guard down! Please, don’t be disappointed in me, Master!”

She gripped Belgrieve’s hands with pleading, teary eyes. *How can this girl have such a strong imagination?* He smiled miserably. But he knew he would be completely defeated the next time they fought, and that would undoubtedly be the best way to dispel her delusions.

Belgrieve invited Sasha in and served her some tea. She took a sip of the fragrant beverage and let out a long breath.

Offering some raisins, Belgrieve said, “Bordeaux must get to its spring work a lot earlier than Turnera.”

“Yes, the snow’s already completely melted, and they’re preparing the fields and threshing the wheat there. The number of fiends has gone down quite a bit, so I’ve been helping with management more than adventurer work these days.”

“I’m glad it’s settled down. But I wonder why there are fewer fiends.”

Sasha seemed taken aback at that statement. “Huh... You haven’t heard? The demon lurking near Orphen was hunted down. It was thanks to that demon that the fiends were acting up.”

I see, so that’s what happened, Belgrieve thought, tacitly accepting the explanation. He was surprised to hear there was a demon before recalling the words of Lady Winter. *Were the demons the beings who tried to control the*

winter? According to legend, there wasn't just one of them. Does that mean demons will be reviving one after another? Was this only the first one?

Oblivious to his musings, Sasha excitedly prattled on. "The team they put together was amazing! They had Maria the Dragonslayer, Dortos the Silverhead, Cheborg the Destroyer, and the one who dealt the final blow was none other than the Black-Haired Valkyrie herself, Angeline! I was sure you'd have heard by now..."

Belgrieve was shocked. He hadn't imagined his daughter might be involved. While a part of him felt happy and proud that her name was up there with the giants even he had heard of, another part didn't want her to head into too much danger. *I guess that's what it means to be a parent*, Belgrieve mused, stroking his beard.

"We barely get any deliveries or letters in the winter... I'm ashamed to say I've only learned of this now. Thank you, Sasha."

"O-Oh no, oh no... I should have brought a newspaper then."

"Don't worry about it. That girl should be coming home if the number of fiends has gone down... So what business did you have with me?"

"Oh, that's right. I'm here on my sister's behalf today. I'm supposed to hand this over."

Sasha presented a letter to him, which was addressed to Hoffman.

He tilted his head. "This is for the village chief, not me..."

"Yes, truth be told, there's a proposal to maintain the roads between Bordeaux and Turnera."

According to Sasha, the fall festival had been the first time Helvetica ever came to Turnera, and she was aghast at the poor roads she had to traverse to get there. How could it be so difficult to travel within Bordeaux territory? There was a chance the village would be isolated should something happen. In addition to this, the cheese and fruit preserves she tasted during the fall festival were very high quality. If the roads were maintained, it would be far more efficient to sell them outside, and possible to import more goods to Turnera.

She did have a point. If the roads were a bit better off, perhaps it would be possible to send letters and packages in the winter too. However, this was not a matter that Belgrieve could decide. The letter was for Hoffman anyways.

He stood, letter in hand. "In any case, let's go see the chief."

Hoffman was in the midst of plowing a field. He was singing a work song as he drove a donkey with a plow.

"Hey, Chief!" Belgrieve called out, and Hoffman came to a stop.

"Oh, Bell! What's up?"

"A little something. This here missy is Sasha of House Bordeaux." Belgrieve introduced her.

"My name is Sasha Bordeaux," she said with a bob. "Are you the chief of Turnera? I've come here as a messenger of my elder sister, Helvetica Bordeaux."

"L-Lady Bordeaux's sister...? I-I apologize for appearing so—"

Sasha frantically stopped him before he could kneel. "No need! I'm fine, perfectly fine! I didn't come here to throw my weight around!"

Belgrieve laughed at the spectacle they made. "Chief, it's been bugging me, but you're not usually this humble."

"Grr... I-I'm a bumpkin, what am I supposed to do?" Hoffman said, scrunching up his large body.

Sasha giggled. She didn't seem to put on airs around commoners, and neither did her sisters. The Bordeaux house was founded by a family that gained influence the good old-fashioned way: they were the descendants of pioneers who shed sweat with the farmers to develop the land around Bordeaux. It seems that joining the dukedom and earning a peerage had done little to change their fundamental nature, and the girls would often make rounds of the territory in the time between their official duties. They would occasionally help farmers with their work as well, though Turnera was a bit far, and they had only started visiting recently.

Yet despite their rustic side, they conducted themselves elegantly. The

combination of these aspects made the girls both easy to get along with yet hard to approach, lending them a peculiar charm.

Insisting he couldn't leave the lady's sister standing, Hoffman led the two to a table in his yard. In the corner of the yard, small children were prodding and whacking at a pile of snow with sticks. These were Hoffman's grandchildren.

"Oi, honey! We got guests! Get our best tea brewing!" Hoffman yelled into the house, then urged Sasha to take a seat. Tattered clouds flowed through the sky, and while the wind was still chilly against the skin, the sun was nice and warm.

Hoffman read the letter and nodded. "I see, the roads... That will be a huge help."

"I'm glad to hear it. And I'd love to have your assistance on the matter."

"With pleasure! You good with that, Bell?"

Belgrieve sipped at his tea and nodded. "It's not a bad deal. But we should probably get everyone together to talk before we make a decision."

"Yeah, you're right. Wouldn't want any squabbling! Lady Sasha, I don't think you'll find anyone against it, but could we send our answer a little later?"

"Of course! Take your time!" Sasha took a sip. "Oh, this tea is delicious!"

"You think so?! We made it from the lent leaves in our humble garden! We add a bit of dried okra flower for the secret ingredient!"

Hoffman was chatting up a storm the moment Sasha complimented him. Belgrieve smiled and sipped the tea—it certainly was good. Belgrieve usually brewed lent leaf tea himself but was a little shocked to hear that the okra flower could make such a big difference.

After some friendly chatting, Sasha took her leave—it seemed Bordeaux was busy at the start of spring. As she departed, she shook Belgrieve's hand vigorously with sparkling eyes.

"Well then, Master! I have to excuse myself! Next time, I'll make you get serious against me!"

"Um, Sasha... I'm telling you, I—"

“Fare thee well! May we meet again!”

She gallantly hopped aboard her horse and raced off. As she was an AA-Rank adventurer, she apparently did not need any guards.

Belgrieve sighed. “She’s a good kid, but...”

“Oi, Bell, it’s gonna get busy around here! Let’s have a town hall tonight! Aha ha ha ha ha!”

Hoffman seemed roused by the first opportunity for industry since Turnera was founded. Belgrieve kneaded his beard. *Well, let’s just leave that to Hoffman and Kerry*, he thought.

He spent the afternoon teaching the children swordsmanship.

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The carriage rattled and shook. While there was still snow here and there, the air was filled with the bounty of spring, and fresh foliage sprouted from the sides of the path.

The carriage was pulled by a lone horse, and Anessa gripped the reins. In the back, Angeline and Miriam sat sandwiched between the luggage.

Chewing on dried fruit from the south, Miriam cheerfully said, “The air tastes great! It’s like my chest is all clear.”

“Uh-huh, isn’t it...? The air is clean around these parts.”

“Right? Orphen was a bit smoggy... Maybe a place like this would be easy on that hag’s lungs...” Miriam muttered without thinking, only to turn her eyes away circumspectly.

Angeline grinned. “You really love Maria, don’t you?”

“Wr-Wr-Wrong! I don’t care about that old bat at all!”

“Hmm, I’ll leave it at that... Here, Anessa.” Angeline smirked as she tossed a piece of fruit over to the driver.

“Oh? Thanks, Ange. It looks like this is gonna take a while. The roads are bad, so we can’t go too fast.”

“Right?” Miriam wistfully sighed. “But just kick back and relax. We’re not in a

rush.”

“I guess so... Oh, but maybe Ange’s in a hurry?”

Angeline shook her head. “There’s nothing to hold me back... No time limit on this vacation, and I am feeling peaceful at last. Heh heh, dad will never see it coming...”

A month had gone by since she slew the demon. By the time the demon was taken care of, the snow had started to melt in Orphen, but it would still be thick in Turnera. And while Angeline wanted to return home that instant, she still had her injured shoulder to worry about. She decided to wait until the snow had melted. The first chance she got, she purchased a wagon and horse with her own money. Then, she loaded it with gifts, invited Anessa and Miriam, and finally embarked on her grand homecoming.

While a few Calamity-Class fiends had appeared since then, the old veterans handled them without issue. They were just the survivors of the outbreak, and after that, Ange was back to the old days of sitting around, waiting for a good request to come in. The adventurers who had left were slowly returning.

Lionel’s old comrades from the capital arrived. They didn’t make it in time for the demon hunt, but were able to participate in the guild reform with Dortos and Cheborg, greatly aiding Lionel’s cause. They were still in the trial stage, but Orphen’s adventurers’ guild, instead of being led by one guild master, was shifting towards resolving issues with a council. By doing so, Orphen’s guild was slowly branching off from the central guild’s policies that revolved around vested interests. However, the central guild was laying down quite a bit of pressure, and there was still a veritable mountain of issues to sort through.

Not that Angeline had much interest in any of that now. The threat to Orphen and its surrounding area was gone. She could see Belgrieve without any reservations, and that was all that mattered.

With that said, she had left Orphen roughly eight days prior, passed through Bordeaux, and was now on the last leg to Turnera. She had yet to run into any trouble and planned to be there within the day. She leaned against her many boxes of things, her hands folded behind her back. The sky was blue, the sun was warm. While she was getting drowsy, she would be roused each time the

carriage bounced over a rock.

The lazy wind carried the scent of spring as though the fresh sprouts had imparted their refreshing green hues to the breeze itself.

“Hey, Ange, where’d you put the mint water?”

“Hmm? Right here.”

“Let me have some too, Merry.”

“You got it. How about you, Ange?”

“I’m fine...”

Miriam uncorked a bottle of water steeped with roughly chopped mint leaves, letting its lung-piercing fragrance fill the carriage. She took a mouthful before passing it off to Anessa, who drank some as well.

Anessa let out a deep breath. “So we’re finally meeting Ange’s father, eh... I’m looking forward to it.”

“But ‘Red Ogre’ sounds pretty scary... Maybe he’s only kind to Ange?” Miriam teased.

Angeline pursed her lips. “My father is not so petty as that... He’s kind to everyone, and very strong too.”

“Ha ha, he must be amazing for you to praise him that much... Oh, whoa there.”

There was a girl on a horse riding from the opposite direction, so Anessa slowed down and shifted from the center to the side of the road. The girl offered a respectful nod and was about to pass when something must have caught her eye in the carriage, as she turned her horse around and rode up beside them.

She called out to them in a clear, valiant voice. “A moment of your time, please! I know it’s rude to speak from horseback, but... Young lady in the wagon! With your splendid black hair and black eyes...are you perchance Angeline the Black-Haired Valkyrie?”

Angeline nodded dubiously. “I am... Who are you?”

The girl leaped down from her horse and approached with a cheerful smile.

“Oh, I knew it had to be so! I am Sasha Bordeaux! I cannot thank you enough for saving my younger sister Seren! To think we could meet here of all places...”

The girl was Sasha, and she was just on her way back from Turnera. Her eyes sparkled as she came face-to-face with one of the people she admired.

However, the expression had vanished from Angeline’s face. “Seren’s older sister...?” she muttered.

“That I am! I look up to you as a fellow adventurer—”

“I see... So it’s *you*...”

“Pardon?”

Angeline jumped out of the carriage. She approached Sasha like a vengeful specter, exuding a fearsome amount of pressure, fighting spirit, and even a bit of bloodlust. Even Sasha, with her skills as an AA-Rank adventurer, retreated a step from a sense of primordial fear.

“A-Angeline...? H-Have I done something...”

“You’ve got some nerve, trying to dodge me and take my father away...but don’t think you can become my mom so easily...”

“Wh-What are you talking about?!”

“Don’t play dumb... I know how you tried to forcefully take my dad back to Bordeaux territory...”

“N-No, that’s a misunderstanding! That was the *other* older sis—”

“Ha... Aha ha... Heh... No excuses. I’ll have to thoroughly check to see if you really understand what makes dad so wonderful!”

“Wh-What are you going to do to me?!”

Angeline grabbed Sasha by the shoulder and peered into her face. She had the look of a fierce deity to her, and Sasha could not prevent a faint “Eek!” from escaping her lips. Were all S-Rank adventurers this terrifying?

Angeline slowly opened her mouth. “Question one... What is my dad’s favorite food?”

“Eep... Huh? F-Food, is it? Sir Belgrieve’s favorite dish?”

“Yes... Hurry up.”

“I don’t know! We’ve only ever had tea together, and we have never shared a meal!” Sasha screamed her answer, and all of a sudden, Angeline was sneering.

“You don’t even know that...? Remember this. My dad likes mutton stewed with jarlberries. A little on the salty side, with dried oregano for seasoning... You dip some light bread into the soup and eat it... I love it too. Also—”

“Calm down, fool.” Anessa lightly rapped her on the head.

Angeline turned to her with narrowed eyes. “What? I’m busy...”

“Hear her out, would you? You’re not seeing eye to eye here.”

Angeline cocked her head, while Miriam chuckled from the wagon.

With a desperate defense, Sasha somehow managed to clear up the misunderstanding. Angeline was red, sulking from having jumped the gun, while Sasha hunkered down, unable to stop herself from trembling. Anessa rubbed her back.

“Are you all right? She becomes a different person where her father’s concerned...”

“Y-Y-Yes. Somehow or another...”

Sasha took a few deep breaths before finally regaining her composure. Miriam offered her some mint water. As its refreshing scent filled her throat, she lowered her head.

“Thank you, I’ve calmed down.”

“Oh no, we’re the ones who should apologize for our idiot. C’mon Ange. Quit pouting and apologize.”

Ange sullenly inclined her head. “I’m sorry...”

“O-Oh, don’t worry, I’m just glad we cleared up this misunderstanding...”

“But you’re an adventurer, Sasha? I’ve heard of nobles who dropped out to become adventurers, but this might be the first time I’ve met an adventurer who’s still a noble,” Miriam observed. Sasha bashfully scratched her cheek.

“Yes, nobles usually see it as a profession for lowlifes, after all... People like me are probably quite rare.”

“You’re AA-Rank, right? It shouldn’t be long before you rise another rank too.”

“I’ve still got a long way to go! I can only call myself first-rate once I can make Sir Belgrieve take me seriously.”

“Belgrieve... Do you mean Ange’s father? Are you learning the sword from him?”

Sasha’s eyes lit up. “Yes! Precisely! Ange’s esteemed father, my master, and the Red Ogre Belgrieve! He has a wonderful way with the sword! Even though his right leg is a prosthetic, he does not let it hinder him—rather, he uses its irregular movements to his advantage, all of which he devised himself! He puts the weight of his entire body into his sword, so it’s fast and heavy! Not to mention, he’s skilled on the strategic front too! When I confronted him earlier today, he purposely went easy on me, and when I knocked his sword out of his hands and was feeling giddy, he closed in and disarmed me barehanded! Don’t drop your guard even when victory is at hand! I have learned a wonderful lesson today! Now I must do my best so that Master takes our match seriously next time!”

Anessa seemed rather put-off by her passionate spiel, while Miriam looked quite intrigued. As for Ange, she had approached Sasha without a sound and grabbed her by the shoulder. Still stricken with lingering fear, Sasha found herself frozen in place.

“Sasha!” Angeline said after a moment’s thought.

“Yes, yes ma’am!”

“Please forgive me for my misunderstanding... You were a comrade after all!” Angeline said, then embraced her with passion.

“Oh... Ohh...! Y-You recognize my potential, Angeline...! I, Sasha Bordeaux, shall spare no effort in catching up to you!”

Sasha, moved to tears, hugged her back. The two held one another, twirling in circles, and Anessa muttered to herself, “I’ve got this feeling...they still aren’t

seeing eye to eye.”

“Heh heh, Sasha’s an interesting gal.”

After some pleasant chatter, they parted from Sasha and were back on the road to Turnera. The wilderness opened up to cultivated fields where fresh, green wheat sprouts peeped out from the melting snow. As if letting out all their pent-up frustrations, their small leaves stretched out towards the sun.

They would be in Turnera soon. The closer they got, the more Angeline’s chest was filled with nostalgia.

“Just a little more...”

“Oh, just look at how vast the fields are. It’s stunning.” Anessa took in a pleasant, deep breath.

Miriam mischievously prodded Angeline. “You’re going to see your father soon, Ange. How do you feel?”

“I’m jumping for joy... I’m happy to be alive!”

“The hell are you on about...” Anessa sighed, though she made the horse pick up the pace.

The scenery Angeline saw from the wagon had hardly changed from when she left: the plains where she had played with the other kids, the narrow paths she’d walk with Belgrieve, and the forest where she’d gathered acorns. Each time a familiar sight entered her vision, she felt something tighten within.

She had been missing it for so long, yet that hole was being filled. At the same time, a strange anxiety began to build. The scenery hadn’t changed, but what about Belgrieve?

Angeline had never found anyone in Orphen who could replace her father. But what if Belgrieve had found someone who could replace *her*? It seemed he had a new disciple in Sasha, who seemed to be around the same age as Angeline. She was lively, cheerful, cute, and she admired Belgrieve enough to speak with such devotion. Surely it wasn’t a bad feeling to be wholeheartedly adored.

There were still plenty of young children in Turnera as well. Knowing

Belgrieve, he would dote on them as if they were his own.

And Ange had also heard of how Countess Bordeaux had approached him. Seren and Sasha were both beautiful, so surely their eldest sister was beautiful too. Of course, she knew Belgrieve had turned her down, but what if he had only done so out of consideration for Ange?

Belgrieve felt a strong sense of responsibility, and it was possible that she had become a shackle preventing him from doing what he wanted. *What if he didn't miss me much when I was gone? What if he's not actually looking forward to me coming home? What if he grew to hate me in the depths of his heart?*

Angeline shook her head. "My father is not that sort of person!"

But the anxiety wouldn't leave her. It grew larger the closer they got to the village. She wanted to return to Turnera so badly, yet now she suddenly felt like running away. There were butterflies fluttering in her stomach.

They had entered the village now. The villagers looked at the carriage curiously, then rubbed their eyes when they saw Angeline. A few greeted her, but she kept her head down and did not try to look their way.

"Which way, Ange?" Anessa asked.

Angeline looked up blankly, a familiar landscape entering her eyes.

"Over there..." She pointed.

Eventually, they were in front of a house. Angeline timidly looked out at it.

There were children gathered in the yard, and they seemed to be swinging wooden swords. Belgrieve watched over them with gentle eyes.

Something clutched at her chest. She nearly burst into tears.

With timid feet, she stepped down from the carriage.

One of the kids noticed her, pointed, and said something. Belgrieve turned to face her. Perhaps he had a few more wrinkles than before. Perhaps his hair had grown a bit faded. But *they* were the same—those same gentle eyes.

"Dad! Um... You know!" Before she knew it, Angeline was sprinting, leaping into the yard. She stood in front of Belgrieve and wailed. "I...I! I've been

working really hard! I became an S-Rank! I beat up a lot of fiends! Ummm... And, er, I saved people in trouble! The other day, I beat a demon, and... Ummm... I'm doing my best and..."

She couldn't figure out what to say, and as she scrambled to find her words, a large, gentle hand rested atop her head. A rugged palm that had wielded a sword and a spade for so long lovingly stroked her hair. The strength drained from her body.

"You've gotten so big."

"Yeah."

"You grew your hair out. It really suits you."

"Yeah."

"You're a full-fledged adult now. For a moment, I didn't recognize you there."

"Yeah."

Why had she ever doubted him? The tears fell from her eyes.

Belgrieve smiled. "Welcome home, Angeline."

"I'm home, dad!"



Extra: A Small Adventurer

This is a story of when Angeline was only eight years old.

In fields that had become a patchwork of black dirt and white snow walked some donkeys. Behind them, farmers hoisted up plows and sang cheerful work songs, occasionally interjecting with a sharp reprimand for the beasts. The donkeys plodded on with a leisurely gait as though to match the tempo of the farmers' songs, going one way and then the other repeatedly as the mottled ground gradually was plowed a uniform black.

The snowmelt was when the outside work began. Everyone's bodies felt stiff from the winter, but there was no time to use that excuse to slack off. They needed to prepare their fields quickly to bury their seed potatoes, sow the spring wheat, and threshed the fall wheat sprouting from the snow.

The sheep and goats would set upon the fresh young grass with gusto, growing entranced with all the fresh vegetation they couldn't eat in the winter. At times they would also wander into the fields and eat the wheat sprouts, eliciting shouts from the farmers.

Belgrieve put up a hard fight with a patch of viscous soil as he readied a field—not one of the village's commons, but a field of his own. Each time he hammered his hoe into the ground, dark soil would coil and snag the tip.

Donkeys and horses were used to plow the vast communal fields, but the smaller ones for each house were maintained one swing at a time. The motion was like a sword lowered from a high stance, and he considered this job a part of his training. However, the endpoint of each slash would always be the ground, and the impact would reverberate through his body. After keeping at it for so long, he began to feel it in his back and hips.

Belgrieve worked slowly, carrying on a long negotiation with his aching muscles all the way. He would occasionally put his hand to his hip and bend his torso this way and that. With the ground so viscous, each individual move took a bit of careful planning.

It was almost time for the spring festival. The fall wheat had mostly been threshed by now, and roughly eighty percent of the fields for the spring wheat and potatoes had been weeded and plowed.

Angeline ran up to him with light feet. She had a small bag hanging from her shoulder and a dagger at her hip.

“I’m going, dad.”

“Hm? Oh, take care.”

She crossed the yard and kept running from there. *She’s going to play, right?* Belgrieve thought, seeing her off with a glance. He began swinging his hoe once more.

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The water from the snowmelt flowed all around in brooks and creeks, chilling to the touch. While the sun’s rays beaming down clearly belonged to spring, the wind against her skin still retained the winter’s cold, and each breath was still white.

Angeline walked through the plains outside the village. The children she usually played with weren’t anywhere to be seen, and she toddled around alone. At times, the damp ground beneath her would ooze water as she stepped. There were some places where the water was deeper, and once her foot hit such a patch, she grimaced.

“Grr... I’m already soggy today.”

After that, she finally began proceeding with caution. She would avoid what looked like a muddy spot, and if she saw a large rock, she would step on it instead of the ground. She knew this place well; she walked through it with Belgrieve every morning, and she would often come to play with her friends. The brooks that formed only at this time of year made it even more fun to romp around, and she had been here with friends a number of times during the melt. Her unsteady footing during those times made it feel like she was on an adventure.

For a while, she walked with her eyes on the ground. Once she raised her head, she caught sight of a solitary goat on the crags—perhaps it had just come

from grazing. Its jaw churned as it chewed, and its sideways slit eyes focused on Angeline. Angeline pursed her lips, staring straight back at it.

“You didn’t see me... It’s a secret.” She raised a finger to her lips and shushed it, before pressing onward even faster.

“Meh,” the goat replied.

Only a little further down, the isolated trees suddenly grew into a denser forest. Some had lost all their leaves, but there were plenty of evergreens as well, and the snow still remained where the branches and foliage shielded it from the sun’s rays. Still, it gradually melted away in the daytime heat, and the trickles from the branches made it seem as though it was raining in the forest.

Even when it’s so bright outside, Angeline thought, giggling to herself. She would still find herself a little startled each time a large droplet collided with her shoulders or head.

This was her first time entering the forest alone. She would always venture out with Belgrieve to gather herbs, fruit, and mushrooms. Much like the other children, Angeline loved exploring the forest. The greenery grew thicker the further into its depths she went; here, large trees would sometimes collapse and leave behind mossy logs, while new, smaller trees would sprout in their place. Young as she was, the scene played on her heartstrings. She also loved the meals they would share as they sat on those fallen trees, and the marvelous fairy tales Belgrieve would tell there—stories of the spirits and the forest’s other inhabitants. These tales were intriguing and even terrifying at times.

Angeline came to a stop and looked around. A new tree was growing from a dead, decaying trunk—here, life and death existed in harmony. If she stood silently, she could feel the line separating her from the forest grow ambiguous. It was like she could feel strange stares from here and there. The forest she always entered with Belgrieve seemed completely different once she was on her own.

And so, her heart soared higher and higher the further in she went. While her thirst for adventure raised her spirits, she also felt somewhat scared and helpless. She did not think of herself as weak—she trained with the blade every day, and was confident that the dagger at her hip could take care of anything

that came her way.

The darkness, however, evoked a completely different sort of fear. Terror raced through her mind: the fear of being unable to leave, of wandering the forest forever... Angeline shook her head to rid herself of all the bad thoughts.

"I'm not scared... I can get glowgrass all on my own..." she convinced herself, walking off once again with even larger strides than before.

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There had been a small dinner party at Kerry's house the other day, and Belgrieve and Angeline had been invited. A few affable farmers had gotten together to restore their spirits just before the year's work began. The adults carried on a lighthearted chat as they sipped the cider that had been served with the pretense of testing the batch.

Kerry poured himself a cup and laughed. "Finally spring, eh! Comes sooner every year!"

"My thoughts exactly... It's gonna get busy," Belgrieve muttered, and the gathered farmers nodded.

"Nearly festival time already... Hey, the wheat isn't sprouting right in a few spots."

"Where? What spots?"

"Along the western stream. Maybe we didn't spread enough seed."

"That ain't good. Want me to add a bit more?"

"Nah, we'll keep the threshing in moderation, and add a bit more fertilizer. We'll manage somehow or another once the stalks thicken up."

"That so? I got more than enough manure on hand. Want some, just say the word."

"You're a real lifesaver there."

"Hey, Bell? You have enough taters at your place?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Our fields aren't that large, anyways."

"I see... Thing is, we stored our taters a little too well this year, and we've got

more'n we know what to do with."

The farmer talking to Belgrieve scratched his head, and another one laughed.

"Now's as good a time as any—how about you expand that field?"

"Maybe you're right... Kerry, can you lend me your donkey sometime?"

"Sure, go right ahead—after I'm done with my field, though."

"Wouldn't have it any other way. I'll hold you to it."

With Angeline sitting on his lap, Belgrieve sipped his cider, mulling over tomorrow's work. Angeline, meanwhile, was hugging Kerry's cat, enraptured by its fluff.

The fire in the hearth burned bright and red, adding modest warm hues to the piercing cold of the early spring evening. Kerry's house was quite large, accommodating his wealth and large family. His dining room fit more than ten—including the children—and still had space to spare. Kerry's wife was roasting the wildfowl Belgrieve had hunted earlier in the day. Smacking their lips at the aromatic meat, they mustered the willpower to get to work.

Talks would turn to work whenever farmers gathered, but they all looked forward to the spring festival that awaited them beyond it. It was held every year on the very first day of spring on the official calendar. Around these parts, the snow began melting quite a bit before that, and field work was already well underway. Their spring began before the calendar said it did, and the villagers did all they could from the end of winter to make sure their duties did not pile up. By the time they reached a good stopping point, the festivities would be upon them.

The feasts of the spring festival mainly centered around their leftover winter stockpiles, so it fell short of the fall festival. Even so, it was a feast after the first bit of hard work since the beginning of winter. The harder they exerted themselves, the more they could relish in what was to come, and so, they did not hesitate to shed sweat. They drank in moderation at these minor get-togethers, but would often wind up dead drunk by the end of the spring festival.

"Isn't this year's cider a bit sour?"

“Nah, probably just the barrel.”

“I’m looking forward to the tasting competition. Who do you think will win this year?”

“We’ll have to wait and see.”

“Are you gonna harvest glowgrass this year, Bell?”

“Yeah.”

“Again? I’m surprised you haven’t grown tired of it yet. The paper lanterns are enough.”

“Ha ha, just let me be stubborn, why don’t you? My old ma and pa used to like it...” Belgrieve smiled and downed his cider.

Around the start of spring, glowgrass would bloom with sturdy, round, lamp-like flowers. These flowers were around the size of burrs, and when night came around, their pollen would let off a faint blue phosphorescence to attract insects. If distilled liquor was splashed over the stamen, they would glow vermillion instead.

The spring festival was also a ceremony to lay spirits to rest. According to Turnera’s local religious customs, the fall festival was when offerings were made to Almighty Vienna and the spirits to welcome the ghosts of one’s ancestors. These ghosts would stay in the house through the winter, watching over their descendants and ensuring they survived the cold. Eventually, once spring arrived, they were to be sent back to the land of the dead.

To this end, the day would be spent in revelry with friends and ancestors, and once the sun set, vermillion glowgrass would be sent adrift down the snowmelt streams to see the spirits on their way. Their farewell feast would continue late into the night.

However, it had been quite a long time since glowgrass had been used by anybody else. Nowadays, paper would be stretched over a wood-carved structure, and a candle would be inserted inside. The village elders said this was because it had never been this easy to obtain paper.

There had once been great fields of wild glowgrass, but they had been turned

to wheat fields in their grandparents' generation. After all, glowgrass only grew in fertile ground with good sunlight, and those places were also perfect for fields. Development of the land proceeded bit by bit until now, when only a few fickle stalks still grew around the village.

Though paper lanterns were now the norm, ever since Belgrieve returned to Turnera, he would venture out to harvest glowgrass at the start of every spring. There were still many houses that used glowgrass when he was still a child, and his parents were very fond of their vermillion lights.

Belgrieve's memories of his parents were faint. His father died when he was seven, his mother when he was eleven. He was pretty sure he was loved, but he couldn't remember his father's face, and lately, he was on the verge of forgetting his mother as well. However, while the images faded, the emotions he felt as they all watched the glowgrass float down the river were still carved into his heart.

This was the least he could offer to his parents who had passed on before he could repay them, and so he would dutifully harvest glowgrass every year. Each time he watched the lights, he would feel those memories renew themselves.

The dinner was over before nightfall, and Belgrieve returned with Angeline on his back. Angeline was a little drowsy by then, but the cool air kept her up, and she fidgeted on his back.

"Dad," she said.

"Hmm? What's up?"

"Are you going to search for glowgrass again...?"

"Yeah, every year. I know we're busy, but your grandma and grandpa really loved it."

"Yeah...but...the field..."

"Ha ha, not much we can do about that. It happens every year, and I'm used to it."

"I see..."

Angeline buried her face in his back and closed her eyes.

I want to help dad out in any way I can, thought Angeline.

Belgrieve was spending each day earnestly working his fields. He prepped the soil and ventured into the mountains whenever he had free time. Not only that, he also helped out with other people's fields, and did all the cooking, cleaning, and laundry at home. Angeline assisted, of course, but she wasn't nearly as skilled. With her small body, there was a limit to what she could do for the fields.

Foraging in the mountains was where she showed the most promise. She was confident in her eyes—she could spot herbs, fruit, and mushrooms even before Belgrieve could, and she was good at climbing trees, which Belgrieve struggled with due to his peg leg. In the fall, she would climb up to pluck grapes and akebia.

She decided she would gather glowgrass in his stead. Spring was busy enough as it was, and it took much time just to venture into the forest's depths and back again. She wanted to lessen the burden on Belgrieve, even if only by a little.

Angeline had gone glowgrass picking with him before. Back then, Belgrieve had taken her to a clearing on the opposite side of the western mountain. It was at the foot of the mountain, so she wouldn't have to climb, but it was still a long journey through the forest to get there. At the onset of spring, the forest was dark with poor visibility, and the ground was oftentimes wet and spongy.

She remembered how the scenery suddenly opened up to countless round petals swaying over a gentle slope—a beautiful view.

"Will dad praise me? Hee hee..." She giggled, picturing Belgrieve patting her head as she returned with her arms full of glowgrass. She had snuck out secretly to surprise him, and surely Belgrieve would be delighted to see how much she had grown.

Angeline leaned her back against a large rock to rest. It was in the sunlight, and pleasantly warm. It was right around the time the sun began tilting to the west. She felt hungry. From her bag, she produced a hard loaf of bread with goat cheese and bit into it.

She took a sweeping look around herself. She was deep in the forest now, and she had made it here alone. Excluding Belgrieve, even the village adults couldn't make it this far. The thought did frighten Angeline, but it made her proud as well. Perhaps this was the first step for her to become the adventurer she always wanted to be.

"Heh heh... I'm an adventurer!"

She drew her dagger, playfully swinging it around as if a fiend had appeared right before her. Gradually, she grew more and more heated, and then it wasn't just her blade—her feet were moving to match this nonexistent foe too, and she was putting on a show by herself. The story played out in her head.

A powerful fiend popped out. Dad is very strong, but the fiend got him by surprise and injured him. And then, I gallantly jump out! She pretended to cover for him, glaring straight ahead.

"Dad...you're safe now! Come, fiend! You're going to have to go through me!"

The fiend obviously has to be a dragon or demon or something strong like that. I mean, it's good enough to injure dad after all. But I'm not going to lose. I learned the sword from dad, and I'm not going to lose to anyone but dad. No matter what.

She grew more and more excited, mixing in shouts and lines she knew sounded cool in the moment.

"En garde! Hyah! Hmm, not bad... Let me guess, you are...the Dragon of Legend!"

Her battle with the imaginary dragon reached its climax, and by the time she finally used her finishing move to take its head, Angeline was completely worn out. She had jumped around so much in her trance that she had worked up a sweat.

Once again, she sat against the rock and let out a deep breath.

"What a battle..." she lamented, her delusions evidently going on.

She had eaten lunch, moved a lot, and was now basking in the warmth of the sun. The sandman took her by complete surprise, and she was snoring before

she had any say in the matter.

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“Kerryyyyyyy...”

“Whoa?!”

Just as Kerry was returning home from his fields, he was shocked to come across Belgrieve, who looked as if judgment day was upon him. The sun had already sunk and it was almost pitch black outside. He couldn’t even tell who it was until he was closer, and it was that exact time of day where scary monsters were prone to come after the bad boys and girls. Kerry inadvertently cried out.

“B-Bell! Don’t scare me, good grief...”

“Ange...Ange didn’t come home... It’s already so dark out...”

“Huh? Ange? Isn’t she out playing with the other kids, then?”

“All the other kids are home safe... Wh-Wh-What do I do, Kerry...? Don’t tell me she was kidnapped...or maybe... Oh, Ange...”

Whatever he was imagining, it made Belgrieve cover his face and cry out in agony. Kerry sighed and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Oi, Bell, this ain’t like you at all. First, settle down.”

“H-H-How am I supposed to settle down?! This has never happened before!”

Kerry almost cracked a smile seeing Belgrieve—who was usually so calm and collected—in a frenzy, but this was no time to laugh. He grabbed Belgrieve’s shoulder rather roughly and shook it.

“Stupid! What good does it do for you to lose your mind?! Stay like that, and you’re even less likely to find her!”

“Erk... Y-You’re right... Sorry...”

“In any case, let’s go around asking if anyone saw Ange. I’ll call out to anyone who’s free to search.”

“Yeah... Sorry...”

Having somewhat regained his calm, Belgrieve went around asking the other

villagers. Most didn't know anything, and none of the kids had played with Angeline that day. However, a herdboys who had sent his goats out to graze claimed he saw her.

"She was on her own. Went off towards the forest, if I recall."

Belgrieve turned pale. *The forest? Alone? For what?*

"Don't tell me... The glowgrass?"

He hadn't the time to think. Belgrieve rushed home, grabbed his sword and a lantern, and raced out.

On the way, he passed a curious villager who called out, "Bell? What's wrong?"

"I'm gonna find Ange!"

The forest was dark enough during the day, and even darker at night. He couldn't see his own feet, and this made him far slower with his peg leg. One slight misstep would be enough to send him tumbling, as it would be impossible to brace his toes. If he stepped on rotting wood, the tip of his prosthesis would sink in; if he stepped on damp rocks, he could slip. When it was bright out, he would unconsciously avoid all of these hazards the moment his eyes registered them, but it was harder to discern them by lamplight. Nevertheless, his heart would not allow him to slow down.

Belgrieve anxiously shouted out Angeline's name as he sped onward, his voice futilely reverberating between the trees.

○

A sudden cold breeze swept over her. Shivering, Angeline leaped to her feet.

"Hmm...? Where was I again..."

It had grown so very dark while she wasn't looking; evidently, night had fallen during her little nap. Angeline tilted her head, momentarily wondering why she was outside, but quickly recalled she had come to the forest. And then, she panicked.

"Wh-What do I do..."

She had intended to be out before it grew dark. Then, she would tell Belgrieve of her adventure and eat dinner with him. Yet night had fallen—it was pitch black here and there, and she could only vaguely make out the outlines of the trees from the contrasting shadows. The stars in the sky above seemed her only salvation.

“West is...thataway,” she said, taking her bearing from the constellations—a skill she had learned from Belgrieve. This was her first time entering the forest at night, but she had heard stories. Her eyes couldn’t be relied on, so she was apparently supposed to make good use of her nose and ears. Also, she knew she had to stay put unless it was absolutely unavoidable.

“But...”

It was too terrifying to stick around here. Even the great rock she had been entrusting her body to had grown cold, as though it was belittling her. She felt as if some formless something was watching her from beyond the darkness; she would have much preferred it to be something her blade could cut. Whatever happened, she very much wanted to avoid being dragged into the darkness to wander forever.

For now, let’s head towards the glowgrass, she thought. It wasn’t as if she had a clear reason. Simply put, in the frenzied mind of a child, the simplest solution seemed to be following her initial objective.

Angeline shuffled onward, driven by fear and desolation. She could be distracted from those emotions ever so slightly so long as she kept moving. She held her hands out in front of her as she walked, but as her eyes gradually grew accustomed to the dark, she developed a hazy grasp of the forest at night. She had previously been desperate not to topple over, but her pace was gradually growing smoother. Her heart calmed, and her courage was coming back.

Suddenly, a forest bird cawed and flew from its perch. The sound of its wings and the rustle of leaves resounded through the air. Angeline drew her dagger and readied herself. She was roused once again; her heart raced, and her breaths were detestably loud.

“Urgh...”

She wiped away her slowly building tears with the back of her hand and

continued walking. The cold pricked her body, and she let out a pure white breath. She rubbed her hands together for some warmth. Angeline had been driven by coldness and loneliness, but once she came to and looked around, she was finally stricken by despair. She knew what direction she was headed in, but had no idea where she was. Even as she headed vaguely westward, she was still walking blindly.

After continuing on for some time, she hunkered down and hugged her knees. Her tears spilled out over the ground, and her heart was overcome with regret, wondering why she had ever come to pick glowgrass alone.

Is dad worried about me? Is he searching for me now?

She felt pathetic for making Belgrieve worry. She wanted to return home and have him praise her for how much she had grown, but now her own development was the least of her worries.

“I’m so stupid. Angeline, you idiot...”

She slapped her cheeks and felt them grow hot. Her fingertips, by contrast, were terribly cold. She couldn’t possibly go on now, and for a while, she remained there unmoving. She hugged herself, rubbing her shoulders. But now that she had halted, she could feel the chill on her spine, and she felt as though her teeth didn’t properly lock anymore. Each time she tried to set them still, they would rattle together.

I’m done for, she thought. But the shaking was too strong for her to do anything. Her breathing became shallow, and her white breath ceaselessly lingered in the air.

A bead of faint green light rose from the ground, and she lifted her face in shock.

“Wow...” she mused without thinking.

Small granules, like fireflies, silently flickered in the breeze, a multitude floating before her. Angeline reached out her hand and grabbed for one. However, when she opened her hand, the light was gone. It had been neither hot nor cold; nor was it a bug—in the first place, this was not the season for fireflies.

The lights provided a feeble reprieve from the dark of the woods. The trees and rocks stood out in their faint green glow. It was a phantasmic, enchanting sight, before which Angeline forgot her sorrows. Perhaps one of Belgrieve's forest fairy tales contained lights like these.

She heard a voice in the distance. Snapping to her senses, she took in her surroundings. It was definitely her name in a voice she would never mistake for anyone else.

"Dad! I'm over here!" Angeline cried out. The thicket rustled and parted in response, and it wasn't long before she saw the yellow light of a lantern and the red hair lit by it.

"Ange!"

"Dad!"

The sense of relief surging forth within her severed all the threads keeping her tense, and she once again burst into tears, running at Belgrieve and leaping into his chest. Belgrieve patted her head uncharacteristically roughly.

"You're not hurt, are you?! No? Ah, that's good... You little rascal! You had me worried there!"

"I'm sorry... I'm so sorry... Waaaaah!"

○

For the time being, Angeline had cried herself out, and she now sat on Belgrieve's lap. It was big and warm, offering much peace of mind.

The lantern's light showed that Belgrieve was in tatters. His clothes were muddy here and there—signs he had taken more than a few tumbles. There were scratches on his face from the branches he ran into as he ran, and withered leaf scraps and mud stuck to his hair. Angeline felt profoundly apologetic, yet Belgrieve seemed completely unperturbed. Regardless of what happened, he was satisfied that Angeline was all right.

"You did well, making it all the way here alone..."

"Yeah..."

"But there will be no second time, okay? Your father was incredibly worried

about you.”

“Yeah... I’m sorry...”

Angeline seemed terribly crestfallen, so Belgrieve smiled and lifted her to her feet.

“All right, let’s get going.”

“Yeah. Are we going home?”

“No—since we’re here anyway, let’s get some glowgrass before we go.”

“B-But you said the forest was dangerous at night...”

“Hey now, if you understand that, then you know you shouldn’t come here alone.”

“Erp...”

Seeing her down in the dumps again, Belgrieve chuckled and placed a hand on her head.

“It’s all right. Dad is here with you.”

Angeline had been a little tense from guilt, yet all those knots unraveled all at once. *Dad is with me!* To Angeline, there were no words in the world more reassuring than those. Her lone wolf adventure was thrilling and wonderful, but going out with her father was even better. Angeline happily clung to Belgrieve’s arm and gripped his hand.

“Let’s hold hands!”

“Right, so we don’t lose each other... Oh no, you’ve gotten so cold...”

Belgrieve rubbed her back to warm her, walking slowly to match her pace. They only had the light of the small lantern between them, but so long as they didn’t rush, they were in no danger of stumbling.

When she took it all in without fear, the night forest was brimming with a peculiar charm. The darkness where all the scary things lurked suddenly seemed so warm and welcoming. The sounds made by the wind passing over her head and rustling the leaves were beautiful. She was delighted when she spotted an owl clinging to a branch, and gleeful as a field mouse scurried past

her feet.

At times, Belgrieve would stop and motion for her to lower her voice. He would urge her to peer into the dark. When she focused her eyes, she could make out animals quietly staring back.

“The night forest is their world,” Belgrieve told her. “They’re the ones watching us. So you have to hone every sense in your body.”

Angeline nodded. That feeling of being watched from all around probably wasn’t her imagination. She suddenly recalled the faint green lights and wondered if those were living beings as well. She asked Belgrieve, who mulled the question over.

“That may have been spirit fire.”

“Spirit fire?”

“I think I’ve told you the story. Do you remember Isolde the Lost?”

“Yeah!”

It was an old fairy tale—a story of a young girl called Isolde who lost her way in the woods, only for a peculiar green light to lead her back to the village. Angeline knew she had heard about it somewhere before.

“There are spirits living in the forests. Sometimes they might do something miraculous on a whim.”

“You mean making us walk round and round in circles like those mischievous fairies?”

“Ha ha, sometimes. Those are a type of spirit too. But spirits like children. I’m sure they came to you because you were sad and alone, Ange.”

“I see...”

Angeline looked around again, growing a little bashful at the thought that it wasn’t just animals but spirits watching her as well.

Belgrieve proceeded cautiously, his mind focused on every step. Soon, there was a haze of clouds over the sky, obscuring any good view of the stars. Angeline couldn’t see any silverwurm grass either. It would be impossible to tell

where they were going like this, yet Belgrieve continued.

She grew a little anxious. “Dad...”

“Yes?”

“Do you know where we’re going...?”

“Heh heh, your father has been here many times before—even before I was blessed with you.” He smiled. This forest around the foot of the mountain was practically his backyard.

All of a sudden, the trees opened up and the wind bellowed. This cold piercing wind forced Angeline to cover her face with her hands. She could hear the silky rustling of grass.

“Have a look, Ange,” Belgrieve gently told her.

She opened her eyes.

Glowgrass swayed as far as her eyes could see. Each flower was like a round chestnut-sized orb, giving off a pale blue light. With every gust of wind, pollen flickered and the lights moved about. Belgrieve’s profile was dimly lit from below, making him look like someone else entirely.



The scene could not have been of this world—for a while, Angeline was at a loss for words. The last time Belgrieve had taken her here, it had been during the day. The glowgrass had covered the ground all the same, but it wasn't illuminated like this. Angeline found herself racing forth, making her way into the faint rows of light. They seemed strangely brilliant when observed from up close.

She turned, waving her hand. Belgrieve smiled and waved back.

○

The dark sky was dyed purple along the western mountain ridge. Despite all the stars in the sky, many were yet hidden, perhaps by the half-moon in the sky. A number of basketed fires had been lit along the narrow path to the river.

By the time the banquet—which started at noon—died down a bit, the villagers, each carrying a paper lantern, lit their torches and gathered at the river near the village. The runoff from the melted snow had made the river far larger and fiercer than usual. There was still a bit of ice remaining on its banks.

“To Almighty Vienna and our forefathers!”

The priest chanted a prayer and held up his flame. The villagers lit the candles in their paper lanterns and rested them on the water, to be carried off by the flow.

Belgrieve splashed a bit of liquor on the stamen of his pale blue glowgrass flower. It happened near instantaneously—the light turned red as if a flame had been lit within.

“All right, let it go.”

Angeline nodded, a bit anxious as she sent the glowgrass floating down the river. She watched as it joined the paper lanterns, teetering precariously back and forth before it ultimately sank into the river's depths. However, while this would have extinguished the candles in the lanterns, the glowgrass light lingered just a little longer.

Angeline stared fixedly as the faint vermillion glow was carried further and further downstream.

“It’s pretty, dad...”

“Yeah.”

As the villagers began returning to the square to continue feasting, Angeline stood beside Belgrieve and watched the water flow by. The moonlight poured down on the earth, making the newly descended frost glisten beneath it.

A cold wind caught her by surprise, making her grasp at Belgrieve’s hand. She felt a sense of relief from his rough calluses and just knew that next year she would venture out to pick glowgrass with her father once more.

Extra: When Dad Caught a Cold

His head was a haze, and he was sweating terribly despite all the chills he felt. Something was clogging the back of his nostrils, making it a bit harder to breathe.

His unfocused eyes fell upon Angeline. She was now ten years old, and looked concerned. The moist hand towel on his forehead was faintly warm from his body heat. Angeline dunked it in water from the washbasin, wrung it out, and used it to wipe the sweat from his brow.

“Are you okay, dad...?”

“Yeah... Thank you, Ange... Is it already noon...? I need to cook...”

As he tried to get up, Angeline frantically pushed him back down.

“No, you need to sleep well.”

“Hmm...but...”

“It’s okay. You won’t get better if you don’t sleep...and the day’s almost over already.”

“It’s already that late...?”

With Angeline glaring at him, Belgrieve gave up and returned to lying supine in his bed. He had caught a cold—there was no doubt about that. *I haven’t caught one in ages.*

He felt pathetic and shut his eyes. Angeline stood and added wood to the fire. The fire snapped as it burned, but besides that, he could hear the sound of the pot opening, and a wooden spoon stirring the mix.

It was the beginning of winter, and it grew colder by the day. The sky was covered by an ever-present veil of gray clouds, while the snowy days outnumbered the clear ones.

I didn’t think I would fall into the river, he lamented. He’d mistaken a bit of snow piled up over the frozen river for solid ground on his usual patrol. As it

was close to shore, it wasn't deep nor was he at any risk of drowning. However, he had toppled over, soaking his entire body in cold water that seeped into his clothes; the cold winds made him even worse for wear. He was already feeling chills as he rushed home, and even though he had taken medicine and ate warm soup before he slept, he had a fever the next morning. Still, he had pushed himself to cook breakfast, and once he had something in his stomach and returned to bed, it was already evening.

He let out a deep breath, correcting the placement of the towel on his forehead. He hadn't the energy to offer a wry smile. He had been in the middle of spinning yarn and had barely made any progress sorting beans.

He knew there was no use in rushing, but when he was hazy with a fever, his mind would wander all sorts of places. He was beginning to worry if any of the vegetables stored in the yard had gone rotten.

Angeline retrieved the towel again and rinsed it out. She wiped his sweat and said, "Dad... I warmed up the soup..."

"Mmm..."

Belgrieve sluggishly lifted himself up. He held his spinning head with one hand.

"I'll have some...and...the medicine I boiled yesterday..."

"Got it... Stay where you are."

Angeline poured soup from the pot. As he watched her, Belgrieve felt both happy and pathetic for letting himself be nursed. He scratched his cheek, mulling over his conflicted emotions. A serving of the warm bean and dried-meat soup and the herbal concoction calmed him a bit, and soon he was sleeping peacefully once more.

Relieved, Angeline wiped his face again and added more wood to the fire. She had some soup herself, then stared long and hard at Belgrieve's sleeping face.

"Dad, how cute..."

I guess everyone makes a childlike face when asleep, she thought. On closer inspection, there was a faint mustache growing between his mouth and nose.

While he maintained his beard, he usually shaved the mustache, but perhaps his illness had prevented him today.

“What will happen if he grows it even more...?”

She grimaced as she imagined her father with a full mustache. She had pictured him looking like a completely different person. *This much is enough*, she thought, stroking his stubble. Belgrieve muttered something in his sleep, and she laughed.

It was always the other way. Angeline was always the first to fall asleep. Her father would also be the first to wake. *But today, I got up earlier than dad, and I stayed up because you never know what can happen.* She grinned from ear to ear.

“Don’t worry dad... You have me with you...” she proudly monologued, wringing out the warm hand towel again. She took one of her bedcovers—she usually slept under two layers—and draped it over Belgrieve.

And thus, once the night had passed and morning had come, Belgrieve awoke feeling completely refreshed. The haze in his head had cleared. His body was a little stiff, but that would resolve itself if he moved around a bit. One day of rest was enough.

He stretched, lifting himself to find Ange sprawled out beside him. She only had one blanket wrapped around herself, and her face was a bit red. He had a terrible feeling about this.

“Ange...?”

“Morning, dad...”

Her eyes were bleary, her voice a bit nasally. Belgrieve placed a hand on her head—it was hot.

He sighed. “You caught it... I’m sorry...”

“Urgh...”

Angeline wormed her hand out to grab his, putting it against her cheek and closing her eyes.

With a wry smile on his face, Belgrieve placed his own blanket over her,

wrung out a hand towel, and put it on her forehead.

“Thanks for yesterday... Now it’s dad’s turn.”

“Mmm.”

Despite her cold, Angeline seemed strangely delighted as she buried her face in the covers.

Afterword

“My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer”—looking back on it now, that really is a terrible title. Some sticklers might already feel pure hatred just looking at the length of it, and come away with the impression that it’s not even worth flipping through. I can’t say they’re wrong—it’s not like this book is changing anyone’s life. Even so, to anyone who has taken the gamble to pick it up, you have my heartfelt gratitude.

Now then, this is a fantasy—the point being, we get to enjoy playing around with fantastical elements we couldn’t have in reality, and that will leave a certain aftertaste in the reader’s mouth. I don’t really know if it’s right for the author or whatnot to barge in uninvited after the fact and potentially ruin it, but I’ve been asked to write an afterword, and write one I shall.

That said, it’s not like this story has any interesting behind-the-scenes episodes, so I’m having trouble finding the right things to put here. I know writing about what doesn’t exist is the thrill of fantasy, but that is constrained to the story. I’m not going to fabricate some interesting backstory for the novel here.

On top of that, I’ve heard of odd readers who read the afterword before the story. So I’m not even sure I should be discussing the events of the book here. We’re at an impasse, aren’t we?

Anyways, since I’m having trouble using the one thousand words given to me, I’m just going to jot down whatever comes to mind. The book isn’t even finished yet as I’m writing this, so I can’t even say anything about the physical product. Where is this afterword even going in the completed book?

Though the book isn’t around yet, I do still have Master toi8’s illustrations. I’ve received most of the rough illustrations of the characters. Belgrieve isn’t just a youngster with added wrinkles, he was drawn as a genuine middle-aged man, and Angeline is cute as a button. I burn in envy at Belgrieve for being idolized by such a cute daughter and have therefore considered adding a

random yandere to stab him in the gut.

Not that I'm actually making any changes to the story because of that. On the contrary, I'm in awe at the master's wonderful character designs, and I writhe around under my covers wondering if it's really all right for such fantastic illustrations to be attached to my novel. Then, I get out of bed, open my computer, and look at the illustrations again with a smile. Time flies, and before I realize it, I've come down with sleep deprivation, and it hinders my writing. Oh, toi8, what a sinful beast you are. Thank you.

For everyone reading this book, I'm sure eighty percent of you picked it up thanks to Master toi8's illustrations, while the remaining twenty percent came thanks to the publishing label—especially the efforts of my editors M and M (not a typo). While I offer my deepest gratitude, I'm left wondering if I did anything at all.

This book was originally published online, and it was not submitted to any competitions. I don't know how it happened, but someone hit me up and made it a book. It's like a dream, and I fear that the moment I actually hold the book in my hands, I'll wake up, sigh, and return to my unchanging day-to-day life.

Since it was originally on the internet, I could read reviews of it in real time and watch the rating go up and down. I'm the sort of person who really worries about that; whenever I'm online, I'll abandon my manuscript to keep refreshing the page. And so, when I actually want to make progress, I'll head out to a nearby diner. That's how this afterword was written too. Every little thing just seems to throw me out of whack, and I lose my concentration.

Today, the other customers are all noisily eating and drinking. Having this much white noise actually makes it easier for me to write...

As I tap away at my keyboard, I hear the couple in the next seat over whispering.

"Come to think of it, have you seen the Black-Haired Valkyrie around lately?"

"Oh, I heard she went home for the holidays. Someplace up north."

What? I came after so long, and she's gone again. Still, I'm already writing a mix of fact and fiction, so perhaps I'm better off not meeting her.

The master comes over, looking down on me with his surly face.

“What can I get for you?” he asks.

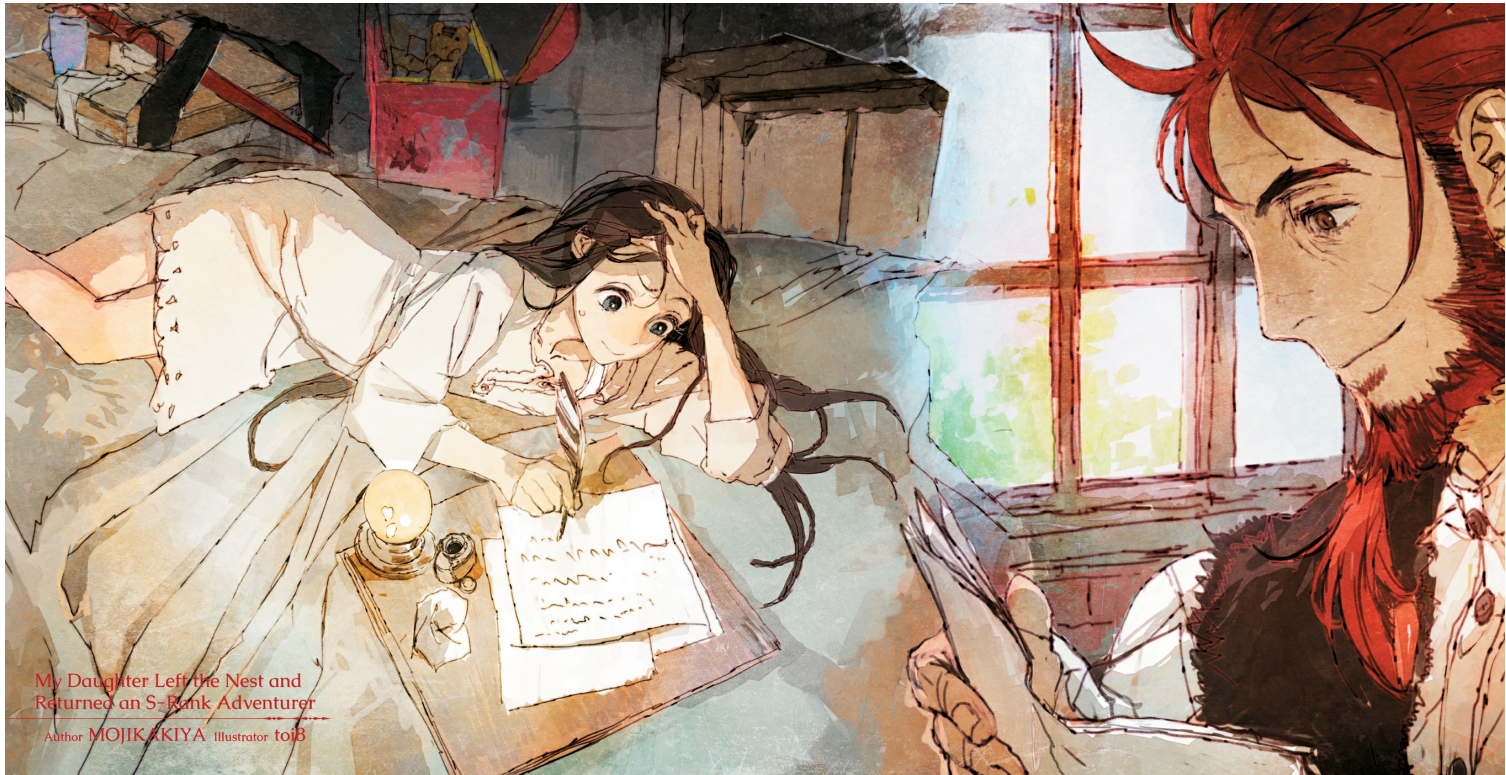
I think for a moment and tell him I want some mulled wine.

I'm sure there must have been a time in his life when old man Bell wielded a knife like this! Will I ever get a chance to draw him in his youth? (How I imagine it.)

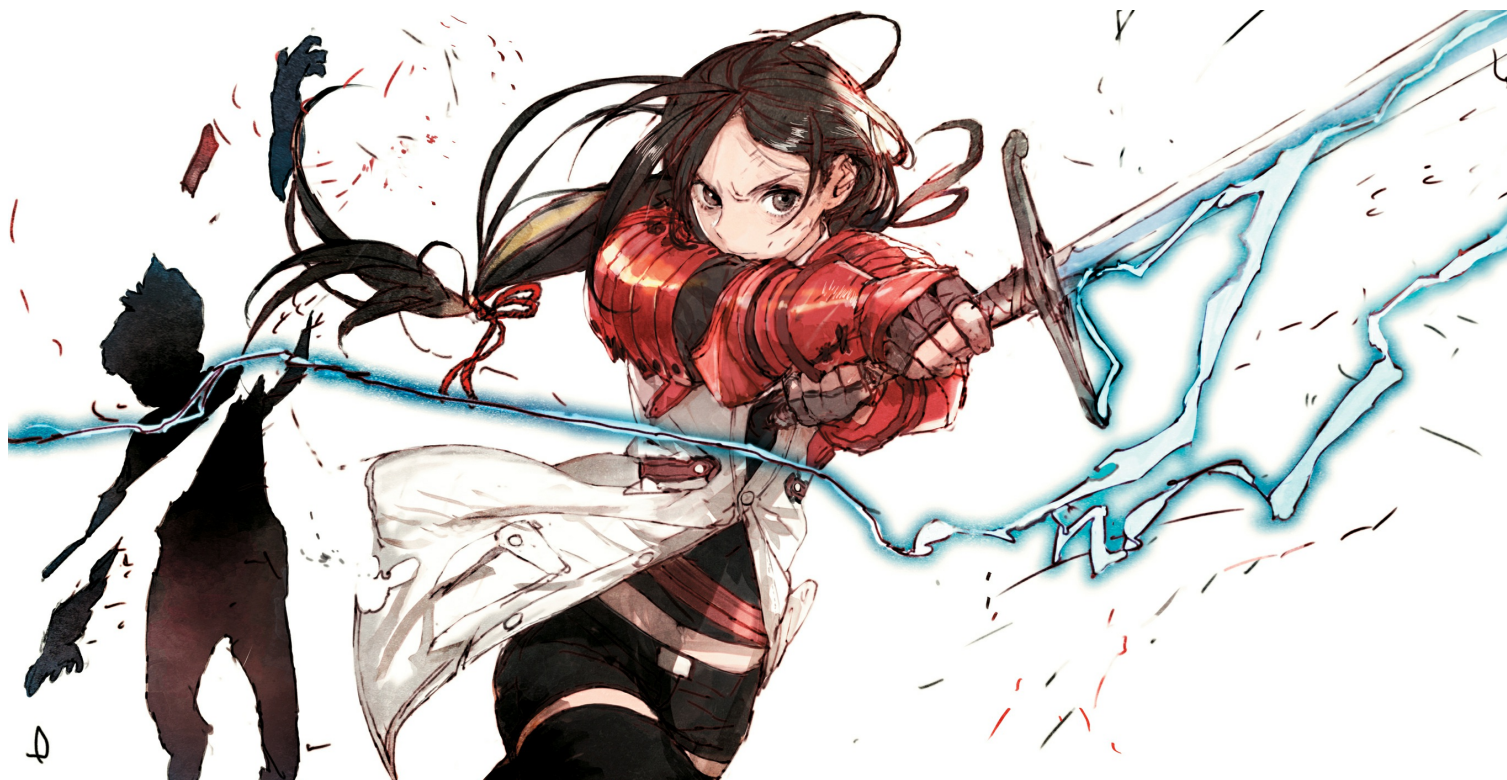
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Toi8





My Daughter Left the Nest and
Returned an S-Rank Adventurer
Author MOJIKAKIYA Illustrator toji3





Bonus Short Stories

Festive Fall

After prayers had been offered to the Great Goddess above, next came the shrill chirrup of a tin whistle, and then the bagpipes, bouzoukis, fiddles, and accordions—all of these instruments burst to life in unison. A lively clamor filled the town square, especially around the stone icon. There were cheers here and there, accompanied by the clacking of wooden tankards struck against one another that spilled copious cider on the hands holding them with each impact.

The sun was in the midst of its descent behind the mountain, and here and there, the glowing bonfires illuminated the faces of festivalgoers. The autumn festival usually would have started a bit sooner, but Helvetica's chaos had delayed it—not that the villagers minded. They were delighted to have the young and beautiful Countess Bordeaux join in on their festivities.

Helvetica and Seren smiled as they were led around as guests of honor. While Helvetica came off as sociable and mild-mannered, the way she walked exuded nobility. The villagers observing from afar knew in their hearts that their lady was quite the individual.

There was one conspicuously larger flame amidst the other bonfires, around which the village children and youth danced and skipped to tunes. Belgrieve watched over this scene, feeling tranquil. The sun was gradually setting, and the dancers looked like nothing more than silhouettes against the flames. This only made them seem even more lively.

Angeline used to jump around with them, Belgrieve reminisced. With his artificial leg, dancing was not his strong suit, but he remembered Angeline dragging him along, and he recalled himself teetering around the ring.

"It's been too long... Or has it?" he mumbled to himself.

It hadn't been so long ago that the image of Angeline as a child had faded from memory.. However, it had already been five years since then. *How has she*

grown? If she had managed to return by now, then just maybe... He shook his head.

"She's doing her best at what she loves."

I can't force her to come back just because I want to see her. That's just me being selfish. He gave a wry smile and took a sip of cider.

A large shadow loomed over him, and he turned to see Hoffman's weary face.

"What are you doing all the way out here, Bell?"

"What? Something wrong, Chief?"

Hoffman scratched his head, a troubled look on his face. "I tried entertaining Lady Helvetica, but I'm not good enough! I feel bad for leaving everything to you, but could you handle this one?"

What a chief we have. Belgrieve chuckled and stood.

"I doubt I'll do any better...but I am the one who asked her to stay."

"Oh, thank Vienna! And sorry!"

When Hoffman brought Belgrieve over, Helvetica joyously rose from her VIP seat.

"Oh, Belgrieve, I was just wondering where you had gone! Come over, don't be shy!"

"Sis."

"I-It's quite all right, Seren..." The countess shrank under her sister's glare.

With a smile, Belgrieve lowered himself into the seat offered to him. It was right beside the statue of the chief goddess, from which he could overlook the whole square. It had grown rather dark by then, and the stars had begun to blink on in the perfectly clear sky.

Belgrieve poured Helvetica a glass of cider, and then said, "I know my invitation was quite spur-of-the-moment. Was there somewhere else you were supposed to be?"

"No, I'm very grateful. I'm the one who should be asking if I'm causing any trouble by being here."

“You’ve caused a boatload of trouble, sis.”

“I-I know, Seren... Can’t we move on?”

“Ha ha, give her a break already, Seren. I don’t really mind... Are the two of you acquainted with this sort of music?”

“Heh heh... Those nobles in the duke’s domain might not know it, but I’ve been surrounded by it since I was a child. I like it more than ballroom waltzes.”

“We’re often invited to village festivals in Bordeaux territory. They play these songs there, more often than not. The dancing might not be so elegant, but I like it as well,” Seren chimed in.

Belgrieve laughed and nodded. “Glad to hear I didn’t waste your time.”

“Heh heh, you’re surprisingly cynical, Belgrieve,” Helvetica chuckled, to which Belgrieve shrugged.

“Who knows? Some things you just stop caring about, once age catches up to you.”

They carried on with small talk as they sipped their cider and partook in the feast. Laughter broke out here and there, and gradually, the ring around the fire was growing larger and larger.

Helvetica watched, delighted, and let out a faint, longing sigh. “Such a lovely village. I wonder why I never came here before.”

“It’s an honor to hear that from you.” Belgrieve poured her another cup of cider.

Helvetica grinned at him. “I’m sure I would never have come here if it hadn’t been for you, Belgrieve. I am thankful for this bond you have forged for me.”

“I hardly did a thing. You should thank my daughter...thank Angeline.”

“Aha ha—that is true, in a sense. But this is undoubtedly your fault: I came here to see you,” Helvetica laughed and prodded Belgrieve in the shoulder.

Seren expelled a fed-up sigh. “There you go, blaming someone else for that bad habit of yours...”

“Oh, c’mon! At least let me have this much! Seren, you meanie!” Helvetica

pouted with puffed-up cheeks.

The stars grew brighter and more numerous as the bonfires burned through the twilight.

Parenting

Cooing sounds gave way to sudden violent and vigorous tapping on wood, and Belgrieve jolted awake.

“Shut up!” he screamed at the ceiling.

He could hear something flapping away, chirping on the way out—a woodpecker, evidently.

Good grief. Belgrieve shook his head and lifted himself up. He equipped his peg leg, stood, and opened the window. It wasn’t yet daybreak; while it wasn’t far off from the time he usually got up, it simply did not sit right with him to be roused like this.

He thought to awaken Angeline as well, before the realization struck him.

“That’s right... She’s gone.”

It was the first spring since Angeline left for Orphen. His daughter had set off in the fall, and he hadn’t received a single word from her, save for one brief letter saying she had arrived. Not that any letters could reach Turnera in the winter. Surely she was busy adjusting to her new working environment.

Every morning, he would unconsciously feel the urge to wake Angeline up, and each morning, he would be reminded she wasn’t there. Though he had sent her off as if it was nothing, that parental side of him couldn’t help but wonder what she was up to. It was almost as if he was the one feeling homesick.

He was, of course, worried when his twelve-year-old daughter set off for the big city alone. However, in Turnera, the kids were already doing as much work as the adults by the time they turned ten. Though still naïve, these children worked their hardest to answer their parents’ expectations.

While kids in the towns grew up in their schools, these farm children instead grew up with work as part of their everyday life. In most cases, Turnera folk

entered and left the world in Turnera—Belgrieve and Angeline being the rare exceptions. However, the village was gradually changing, as there were now more children learning swordsmanship and entering the mountains in admiration of these two anomalous figures.

In any case, the children who had once played around with Angeline had started to work without her. It was nearly inevitable that she had eventually thought to go out and make something of herself. Belgrieve did not want to get in her way, and he trusted her wholeheartedly.

Slipping on his clothes, Belgrieve took up his sword and went out; it was as good a time as any for his daily patrol. Before daybreak, the world was wrapped in lush shadows, and at first glance, it might have seemed like the village was still asleep. This was, however, a busy time of day on closer inspection. There was a thin veil of smoke from the chimneys as each house prepared breakfast, while the air was filled with the sounds of chicken, goats, and sheepdogs. A few farmers were already out in their fields.

Belgrieve watched his own frosty breath rise, then draped a muffler over his mouth and clenched his shaking shoulders. At the beginning of spring, it was still chilly before sunrise. The fact that the climate had more-or-less warmed up only made these minor chills all the more potent.

He only had a vague recollection of it, but he got the feeling Orphen was warmer than Turnera. It was further south, so of course it was entirely possible that this was simply his gut telling him that, but he remembered feeling perfectly fine on the days when all the Orphen adventurers were complaining about the cold.

Was Angeline feeling the same right now? She would otherwise be out and about with a red nose and ruddy cheeks, running around the Turnera snow. Surely she could endure Orphen's winters.

"How should I put it..." Belgrieve said after a moment.

It seemed that no matter what he thought about, it would always come back to Angeline. Perhaps this was normal for a parent, but to him, it felt as if he just didn't know when to give up. In his worry, he considered sending out a mountain of letters. However, if he stirred up the girl's nostalgia, perhaps she

would lose focus at a crucial moment. She could be injured or even killed—this was what Belgrieve told himself each time he found himself sitting by the fireplace with the urge to write.

After making his way around the village, he ventured beyond it. The sun was rising, and his surroundings were tinged with color. The morning dew twinkled in the early sunlight, dazzling his eyes. He slowly climbed the hills, and once he had made it to where he had a full view over the village, he watched the farmers moving about in their fields.

With a long, sharp glance, he made sure nothing suspicious was afoot.

There hadn't been any fiends for a long while, and no hibernating beasts had wandered into the village under a half-sleeping stupor. The days had passed in peace and tranquility, no different from the year before. No different except for Angeline.

She used to love this place, didn't she? Belgrieve's thoughts had turned to Angeline again, naturally. He smiled wryly and stroked his beard.

"Good grief... She's going to laugh at me for acting like this."

He stood up straight, the creaks and cracks in his back letting him hear his body loosening up. *Let's not be too morose. Today's a new day.*

Pushing his jostled scabbard back into place, Belgrieve began the slow climb back down. The village was fully awake now, and in the haze rising from the morning sun, the air resonated with work songs.

Cider Making

"You don't have to choose the best ones. Just pick every one you can," Belgrieve instructed from below.

Eight-year-old Angeline swung freely around the tree. Be they green or misshapen, she plucked and tossed every single apple she came across into the basket below. Angeline was quite a bit better at tree climbing than Belgrieve.

She hummed as she tore the apples from the stems, and once she had filled the basket, Belgrieve lifted and placed it onto the donkey-driven cart. He then

replaced it with another one.

The village was dotted with apple trees, both young and old. The older ones were easily over a hundred years old, but still, every year, they were laden with so much fruit it was near impossible to pick it all. It would ultimately become a burden on the tree, so once the time came around, even the unripe apples were picked.

Apples in Turnera were small enough to fit in the palm of the hand. The majority were red and ripe, giving off an enticing sweet scent.

After she had picked the last one, Angeline looked at Belgrieve and called, “Any more?”

“No, you’re good. Come on down.”

Angeline smoothly made her way down, but once she reached Belgrieve’s height, she pounced on him.

“Whoa!” he exclaimed as he caught her. He set her down on the wagon with the baskets, took up the donkey’s reins, and began walking.

It was customary to make cider whenever fall came around. This was a huge job that required all the villagers: apples from all around the village were harvested, pressed in the village square, and poured into barrels. Cider was one of the few alcoholic beverages they could make in Turnera, and the villagers were eager to make enough to last the year. It would be ready by the next year’s spring festival, and much would be used up in the fall festival after that.

Belgrieve’s cart entered the square, which was filled with the apples gathered from all over. The green ones, the bug-eaten ones, and the rotten ones were all picked out—these would go to the livestock.

Angeline jumped down from the wagon, spread her arms, and took in a huff of the stirring scent. “Hee hee, it smells nice...”

“It does. Now go wash your hands,” Belgrieve urged her. She went and rinsed them off at the water hole with the other children. The water was colder in the fall, and it felt frigid when she stuck her hands into it.

Apple presses were brought out from every house to process the carefully

selected apples. The adults spun the handles round and round while the children romped about and tossed in the apples, all the while the crushed fruity remains oozed out of the bottom. It all went through a strainer, with the apple juice filtered out and the pulp remaining on top. The scent of apples grew even stronger.

The children would often steal tastes of the pulp, a good motivator for them to keep up their work. A few were scolded when they tried tossing in apples from away, and each time laughter would abound.

When the barrels were full, the yeast was added, after which they were brought to the village's communal brewery. This was a sturdy building of stacked stone sealed with mud, made so the temperature inside hardly changed between summer and winter. There the barrels were to be stacked up and allowed a peaceful rest until their time came to shine; it would be a long time before anyone knew what each barrel of cider tasted like. The fall festival would soon be upon them, but the barrels they would crack open for it would be the previous year's vintage.

Once the square had been cleaned up, Belgrieve returned home with a heaping basket of apple pulp, while Angeline returned with a bottle of apple juice.

"We're not done just yet, Ange."

"Okay."

Belgrieve sifted the fireplace for the charcoal buried in the ash, poured the pulp into a pot hanging above it, and kindled a fire. He added a bit of water, squeezed some lemon, and added sugar to the pulp. Sugar was valuable in these parts, but this was for the sake of preservation, and he was not sparing in the amount. It would be pointless if he cut the amount and it ended up rotting.

"Now stir well so it doesn't burn."

Angeline set up camp in front of the pot, a wooden spoon in one hand. At first, it only let off steam, but gradually, it began to bubble and fill the house with a sweet scent.

"Dad...it's boiling."

“Good, good.”

Belgrieve removed some wood to reduce the flame. The boil became gentler, and the apple mash that still retained some sense of cohesion dissolved into a watery mess. This was boiled down further, gradually removing the moisture.

Angeline quietly looked back. Belgrieve was wiping down an earthen pot—and once she knew he was distracted, she discreetly blew on the spoon and stuffed it in her mouth.

“...Howt.”

Sweet, sour, and hot—the apples were syrupy and so good she nearly reached for another spoonful.

“Ange, it’s about time to store it.”

“Yesh!”

Angeline turned in a panic. Belgrieve looked at her dubiously but quickly figured her out.

“You nipped some, didn’t you...”

“Erk...”

Angeline turned away, her cheeks red. Belgrieve laughed and patted her on the head.

“How about we have dinner before we pack it up?”

“Yeah!”

There was no way she could turn down freshly baked bread with hot apple jam. Enraptured, Angeline came back for five more helpings, and each time, Belgrieve slathered on a thick jam layer with a wry smile.

“We won’t have anything to store at this rate.”

The closed windows rattled under the evening breeze.

Winter Nights

A spell of good weather had continued for the past few days, yet today, the

sky had been covered in gray clouds since the early morning, and snow poured down without end. The Orphen cityscape was dyed white, and the sweepers—who would usually be keeping the streets clean—were now tasked with shoveling snow. They wore thick coats, with caps pulled down far enough to hide their faces, and their breath came out white as they worked their shovels.

Angeline sat in her room on the bed, absentmindedly gazing out the window. She did not know how many days she had been stuck doing this. Her shoulder had healed, but it was apparently best if she didn't move it so much. She had never received such a serious wound since becoming an adventurer, and she didn't quite know how to recuperate. And so, she stayed still as told.

Fighting the demon had allowed her to experience many things. This included the boredom that came from having nothing to do. Her young body was simply brimming with energy, and it was quite a trial to hold it down and lay about idly. Perhaps that was even harsher than the pain.

Once afternoon came around, the sun began its descent—not that she could see it through the clouds, but she could make a good guess from the lighting.

“I'm bored...” Angeline flopped down on her back. Her eyes took in that same white ceiling she saw before bed every night. *If I'm going to be seeing it so often, I might as well paint a portrait of dad on it*, she thought to herself. Not that she actually felt compelled to make that dream a reality.

Even when she didn't do anything, she eventually grew hungry. Walking didn't bother her, so she would usually head to the same old tavern, but now that the snow was coming down, she couldn't be bothered to go out. The time passed in vain as she thought long and hard over how she would spend it.

It was strangely lonely to be on her own. She turned over a number of times in bed, buried her face in the pillow, and shut her eyes, distracting herself with the strange flickering sights beneath her eyelids. Though her stomach was empty, the fact she had done nothing made her less inclined to do anything about it.

It had grown terribly dim outside when there was a sudden knocking at the door. Angeline lifted her face.

“It's open...” she muttered.

The door swung open and Miriam popped her head in.

“Yoo-hoo, Ange. How are you feeling?”

“Hmm, not bad. But I’m bored.”

After Miriam came Anessa. They both brushed off the snow they had collected while walking on the streets.

“Hey, Ange! Hah, it sure is cold today.”

“Both of you at once... Is something up?”

“Heh heh, I knew you would be bored, so I came to play,” said Miriam.

“You haven’t had dinner, right? I didn’t think you’d go out in this snow,” Anessa said conversely, and began placing ingredients on the table.

“You got that right... You’re my savior.”

“I’ve been pretty bored these days too. The leftover calamity-class fiends have pretty much been all cleaned up.”

While Angeline’s party was taking it easy, the reinstated retirees were going all out, and by now they had exterminated a majority of the calamity-class fiends. Things were back to how they were before, with the high-ranking fiends restricted to dungeons and far-off, uninhabited lands. Human settlements were safe, at least to a degree. Angeline would probably have been bored even if she could move about.

She had wanted a vacation for so long, but that was because she wanted to return to Turnera. She had never wished to idle here in Orphen. However, the road to Turnera was sealed off by snow, and she would have to wait until spring.

Anessa mixed meat, vegetables, salt and spices into a soup which, along with some soft bread from the bakery and small, salted fish from the grocer, became their dinner. The window glass fogged from the inside warmth.

Angeline ate the fish atop the bread and drank the soup. Its sharp taste worked wonders for warming her body.

“Delish!”

“Ah, the cold makes it even better than usual,” Miriam said, as she carefully blew on her bowl of soup.

Angeline grinned at her. “You’ve got a cat’s tongue...”

“Shut it!”

They argued a bit about pointless things and shared a bit of gossip around the table. Despite this and that, it was nice to have friends around. It staved off the loneliness and was fun in its own right.

The steam wafting off the soup writhed like a living being under the light of the lamp. It seemed the temperature outside was falling as the night drew on, and it gradually became a penetrating cold. The warm soup gradually tasted better the longer they were together.

Suddenly realizing something, Miriam stood, strutted to the window, and rubbed the fogged glass to look outside.

“Oh,” she said and turned. “The snow stopped. The moon is out, and it’s beautiful!”

The three girls crammed into the narrow windowpane and gazed outside. The white-coated townscape sparkled under the silver moonlight.

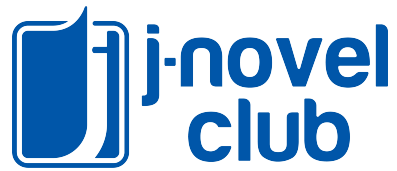
Angeline recalled how she would walk along snowy paths with Belgrieve at night. That silver world under the pale moon was breathtaking, as if it had come straight from a painting.

She hesitated for a moment. “Do you want to go out for a bit?” she asked.

“Sounds good.”

“Let’s go, let’s go!”

The girls hurriedly donned their coats and left. With the lamps snuffed out, the only light remaining was that of the pale moon streaming into the room.



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My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer: Volume 1

by MOJIKAKIYA

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